

BOUNTY BROTHERS

I



Unwavering Faith

Melissa LaShure

LiteraryScape

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DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to my out-of-this-world amazing husband for dressing up for photos, driving to photoshoots, being my entire setup and tear down crew, and my camera man. Without his support this book would not have become a reality. Thank you, Derek, for loving the writer in me. I am looking forward to more great adventures with you!

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Chapter 1



Wichita, May 1873

Someone was touching Claire Belonge. Not just touching, but shaking her. Fighting the darkness, Claire jolted as her fist collided with flesh and bone. She winced. Pain splintered through her knuckles. Wrist throbbed. Her eyes shot open. With her heart racing, she blinked several times to orient herself.

She worked to slow her heart rate and breathing. The soothing, gentle rock of the train helped. The bulging eyes and open mouths on the other passengers' faces did not.

Oh my, this was not at all what she needed. She must arrive at her destination unseen. Punching a fellow passenger was not how she went about being incognito.

An uttered curse drew her attention to the man sitting next to her. He could pass as the Greek god Eros himself, with his flawlessly chiseled nose and chin. His classic handsome features would capture any woman's eye.

Had he been sent to bring her back home? The frightening thought stopped her perusal of Eros. Not that she considered it home anymore. Too many terrible memories. Her uncle's resources were boundless. As was his greed.

She watched as the Greek god beside her rubbed the right side of his face. He stared at her with a piercing green eye, before turning on the charm with a smile that made that emerald eye sparkle. Yes, he most certainly was a heartbreaker. She didn't have time to deal with him, nor did she desire to.

Her heart raced right along with her thoughts while her brain scrambled to come up with a plan. She had to evade this man. She had to get to her brother Lionel.

She closed her eyes and took deep, steady breaths, regaining the poise of a true Fifth Avenue, New York lady. As she adjusted her navy-blue skirt, she schooled her facial expression, opting for the schoolmarm look, as her best friend Madeline called it. Apparently, when she was not interested, Claire had a propensity to express her feelings with flat, tight lips and narrowed eyes. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. Have I injured you in my fright?"

His grin grew, leaving no doubt he caught the sarcasm dripping from her words. He lowered his hand, and she gasped. Oh dear, she had truly clocked him. His eye was already slightly swollen and turning purple. She rubbed her hand. Seeing the damage to his eye made her knuckles hurt more.

"No worries, ma'am. I've suffered a lot worse from far less attractive people."

Claire struggled to hold in the scoff lodged in her throat. The man before her was a charmer, for sure. Given his god-like looks, she had no doubt he could woo any woman who crossed his path. Well, she wouldn't be one of his swooning ladies. Her survival depended on it.

"Why, pray tell, were you waking me from my slumber?"

That flirtatious grin was back. And were his eyes smoldering? A movement across the aisle caught her eye. There sat two young, blushing women fanning themselves, their eyes glued to the Greek god who sat beside her. Good heavens, this man could make a woman swoon from a mile away. All the more reason to get away from him. The more charming, the more dangerous.

“No one talks like that around here. You must be from the East Coast. And if I had to guess, I’d say from the upper crust of New York society.” He narrowed his eyes as he studied her, as if he were trying to solve a riddle. “I think the better question is, what’s a high-class society lady like yourself doing out here in the Wild West?”

Her stomach churned as she struggled to keep her panic at bay. The thoughts swirling around in her head made her feel faint. Would she be able to make it to Lionel in time? How could she escape this man beside her?

Her palms were clammy inside her kid gloves. Placing her hand on her stomach, she took in another slow, deep breath. The lightheadedness receded as she concentrated on her breathing. If this stranger *was* on to her, she wouldn’t make it to the next stop, and her life wouldn’t be the only one that would come to an end.

A train attendant announced they would arrive in Wichita soon. This was the last stop before hers, if she made it that far.

The man next to her shrugged, clearly sensing her unease. “It’s none of my business what you’re doing out here. I just didn’t want you to miss your stop.”

“My stop?” Has this all been a misunderstanding? Did she jump to the wrong conclusion?

“Yeah, Wichita is the last civil place on this train route for a while. I figured you were getting off here.”

A sigh of relief deflated her lungs from the breath she had been holding. The man had only been trying to help her. Not drag her back to the wretchedness that awaited her. “I have much farther to go, but thank you for your concern. Will you be exiting the train at this stop?”

A mischievous sparkle lit his green eyes. “Eager to get rid of me, are you?” He chuckled before giving her a wink. “This is my stop. A word of advice. Stay awake for the rest of the trip. The next person you wake up to may not be a gentleman like me.”

She wouldn’t precisely call him a gentleman. The man was a flirt. As if to prove her point, he turned and winked at the ladies across the aisle.

His charms most likely got him everything he wanted from the fairer sex. However, she was on a mission to stay alive.

Straightening her shoulders and pinching her lips, she let him know his flirtatious ways were not welcome. “I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you, sir.” She shifted away from him to clarify she was dismissing him.

He stood and tipped his hat. “Ma’am.”

Her façade of strength fled, melting her spine to the bench seat. How was she ever going to survive this barbaric land when she couldn’t determine friend from foe?

Chapter 2



This was not how he pictured this going down. Throwing a punch into the ribs of the outlaw sitting on his chest, Brody Young fought to get the upper hand. As the man recoiled, Brody rolled and pushed his bounty off him. He sucked in air as he took his first full breath since this tussle started. Pushing up from the ground, Brody worked to regain his footing.

Fredrick the Fighter was living up to his name. Brody shook his head. Maybe he should have traded George when he and his men drew for this round of bounty hunting. Out of the six men who followed him in battle and then into bounty hunting and ranching, George was the largest. The man stood at six foot six and was built like a Clydesdale. A much better match than his six-foot lean but muscular build.

Yeah, he had muscles, and every one of them was screaming right now. Fredrick was getting to his feet. It was time to put an end to this fight. Without taking his eyes off his bounty, he drew both of his Colts. Fredrick froze at the sight of two gun barrels pointed at him.

“We’re done here, Fredrick.” He huffed out between breaths.

“Just how do you expect to haul me in, Young?” The sneer on his face only made Brody smile. “You ain’t got your Bounty Brothers to back you up this time.”

“Never underestimate a man ridin’ with God.”

Fredrick let out a snort. “Don’t start preachin’ to me, Young.”

So, the man had heard about him and his men sharing the gospel with all their bounties. “Not preachin’ yet. I’ll just remind you that you’re wanted dead or alive or anywhere in between.”

Fredrick narrowed his eyes and stepped forward.

The deathly click of Brody cocking his guns stopped him in his tracks. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Fredrick arched an eyebrow. “You’re one of the good guys. Always playin’ by the rules. You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man, so I say you’re bluffin’.”

“My pa once told me that God always gets His man. You can go willingly”—he firmed up his stance—“or kicking and screaming while God slowly peels your grip on this world, one finger at a time.”

“You’re preachin’ again, Young.”

Brody shrugged. “Just sayin’ you can arrive in Wichita with or without holes.”

Fredrick waited a beat. Brody watched his eyes. They twitched, a sure sign Fredrick the Fighter was going to make a move. The moment he went for his gun, Brody pulled the trigger.

Fredrick howled and uttered a slew of curses as he shook his hand. A hand that now sported a deep gash on the backside where Brody’s bullet had grazed it. “Dag nabbit, Young. What was that for?”

“Just peelin’ back finger number one.”

Frederick’s face turned red as a deep scowl furrowed his brow. “I’m not goin’ in.”

Brody stared him down. With fumbling hands, Fredrick went for his gun. Another shot rang out, leaving a hopping Fredrick in its wake. Followed by another rant filled with unsavory language.

“How many more fingers am I going to have to peel back, Fredrick?”

By the time Brody got Frederick secured and on his horse, he’d peeled back five fingers. He was leaving the last five to God.

Brody rode into Wichita with Fredrick in tow. People walking along the street stopped to stare at the scene. Many gaped at the foul language and threats the man spewed. It didn't bother Brody though. There was nothing the man said Brody had not heard before. Since becoming a bounty hunter, he had been called every name imaginable and had his life threatened many times over. His ears were numb to the rantings. However, the women and children did not need to hear this man's tirade.

He drew his horse, Champion, to an abrupt stop, causing the outlaw's horse to sidestep. The movement jostled the man enough he quit shouting his obscenities. Brody leaned toward him and growled. "There are women and children present, so either you keep your filthy mouth shut, or I'll shut it for you."

The man glared back and parted his lips. Brody pinned him with one of his icy stares while placing his hand on his holster. Fredrick snarled, pressing his lips into a thin white line. They rode on in blessed silence.

How many of his men had already turned in their bounties and were headed back home? He sighed as he thought about sitting on the long porch enjoying a relaxing evening shooting the breeze. It never ceased to amaze him how God had pulled them all together.

Onlookers continued about their business as Brody and his captive made their way to the sheriff's office. Brody was tired, hungry, and in need of a bath. He wanted nothing more than to make a quick transfer of custody, collect his reward money, and settle in for the night. Sheriff Calhoun was used to working with Brody, so he hoped today there would be little to no conversation.

Once Fredrick was securely locked in his cell, Brody made his way to the desk where the older gentleman was filling out paperwork. The sheriff's girth had grown. With the addition of two deputies, Calhoun had been able to stick closer to the jail and town, which meant more time watching the backs of his eyelids.

"He shouldn't give you any more trouble, although he's been swearing that his brother will be breakin' him out." Brody shook his head

as Calhoun sniggered. “Of course, that isn’t anything new for you and me, is it?”

“No, son, it isn’t, but I think I’ve got one for you that will bring a different outcome.”

Brody tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

“I see I’ve piqued your interest. Have a seat, and I’ll fill you in.”

Brody groaned. “Can it wait till mornin’? I am tired, hungry, dirty, and getting a little cranky.” He sounded like a whiny brat, but he was too exhausted to care.

A wide smile broke out on Calhoun’s face. “I think you’re going to want the night to think on this one. I’ll need an answer in the morning.”

Chapter 3



Brody nursed a sarsaparilla at one of the local saloons. The smoky haze that hung in the stagnate air was the like the fog shrouding his thoughts. He was lost and unsure of his next move.

Normally this was where he would get information on his next bounty. Tonight he was mulling over the case Calhoun presented him. One that wouldn't require him to slink around in saloons for a lead. No, this time he knew where his bounty was going and how to find her.

Her. He shook his head at his bounty being a woman. Yet what bothered him the most was the high price on her head and the unknown. Why would a woman from the elite society of New York run off to the lawless town of Dodge City? More importantly, why would she commit the crimes she was accused of? It took a desolate situation for a woman to commit such a desperate act.

Lord, only you know the truth behind this case. I need to know if I should take the job, and if I do, do I take the young lady back to New York?

The potent smell of lavender perfume and Old Tub Bourbon burned his nose before a sultry voice pulled him from his prayer. "You look like you could use some company, suga'." Her hands snaked down his chest as she leaned over his shoulder to brush her lips on his neck.

He grieved for women caught in this line of business. He gently grabbed her wrists and removed her hands from his body. "I appreciate the offer, ma'am, but I'm not looking for company tonight."

She slid into his lap and slipped her hand under his vest as she purred, “What’s wrong, suga? A woman got you down?”

Brody grunted. “Something like that.”

The heat of her hand on his chest took him back to the day his pa showed him how to see saloon girls through the eyes of Jesus. The scene played through his mind for the hundredth time.

“Hey, suga’, I can turn that frown upside down.” Brody had turned to see a provocatively dressed woman perusing him from head to toe. “As handsome as you are, I’ll only charge half.”

She winked and ran her hand down his chest. Nausea from her touch left a bitter taste in his mouth. How could any man want to be with someone like her? He grabbed her wrist and threw her hand away from him in disgust. “I have no interest in cheap pleasure.”

The woman flounced off in a huff, and he joined his father on the wagon bench, suddenly in a hurry to get home and bathe.

“No girl ever dreams of being a prostitute. Women in that position were forced into it by circumstances or sold into it by their own family. Many of them abuse alcohol and opium just to deaden the pain, hoping it will take them out of the life that has been thrust upon them.”

Brody’s stomach became a ball of lead as his father’s words sank in.

“Jesus came to earth to save sinners, to give hope to those who were lost,” his father had said. “That’s every single one of us, son. We who know the Lord as our Savior are commissioned to share Him with others. If we don’t, they’ll perish. We are God’s hands and feet here on earth. Never dismiss someone because of their sins or circumstances. We’re all sinners, after all.”

A hand making its way under Brody’s shirt brought him back to his present situation. The woman pressed her chest against his, allowing her cleavage to spill out of her low-cut dress. He averted his eyes to hers.

“I can promise you a real good time that’ll make you forget whatever woman troubles you’re havin’.”

“I’m sure you can, ma’am, but it’s time for me to be headin’ out.” Brody reached into his vest pocket and fished out a five-dollar bill. “This

is yours, free and clear.” He gently lifted her off his lap and stood, wanting nothing more than to take this woman with him. Years of removing women from these situations taught him it took time. “Do you know Alice across the way?” As she nodded, there were tears in her eyes. “She’s a good friend of mine. What’s your name?”

“Lily.”

“Well, Lily, if you ever want out, let Alice know. She knows how to get a hold of me, and I’ll get you somewhere safe.”

Lily grabbed his arm. “Thank you.” She sniffed. “That woman you’re worryin’ about is real lucky.”

Brody patted her hand before walking out, shaking his head. Meeting Lily was God’s answer to his prayer. He would go after Miss Claire Belonge and see what kind of trouble she was in.

Brody flung open the saloon’s batwing doors as he let out a sigh. His mother would be devastated upon learning he wouldn’t be coming home to visit. He hated that. He had been missing his family, which was growing by leaps and bounds now that all his siblings were married. His mother never failed to remind him he needed a wife.

The thwack of the door hitting something followed by a grunt snapped Brody out of his self-pity. He looked over as the door swung shut to see his childhood friend James doubled over on the boardwalk.

“That bad of a night, brother?” James gasped as he rose to his full height of six feet two inches, only two inches taller than Brody. James’s hair, sandy brown and still damp from the barber, accompanied his sparkling green eyes filled with amusement. “I figured with the return of one bounty and a new bounty to chase, you’d be in a better mood.”

Brody scratched the back of his neck. “Sorry about that, James. Got a lot on my mind. How much did Calhoun tell you?”

“Next to nothing. Care to explain over a drink?”

Brody didn’t imbibe, and James knew that. Brody always had to rescue James from trouble because he couldn’t control his drinking. Since the war, his partying days were few and far between. Witnessing death

every day compelled a man to search for a higher power, and Brody was grateful God had intervened in James's life.

Brody quirked an eyebrow. "You buyin'?"

James waved his wallet in the air. "Just cashed in another one of our bounties, so the drinks are on the boys."

"In that case, I could go for another sarsaparilla, but let's get it at Alice's. Then you can explain how you got that shiner."

Mischief twinkled in James's eyes as he rubbed his cheek. "Oh, this ol' shiner? Compliments of one of the prettiest girls I've seen this side of the Mississippi."

Brody grunted as he strode down the street. "So you've come across a woman who wasn't swayed by your charisma?"

"Oh, now come on, Brody. I can't help it if the ladies flock to me." He wiggled his eyebrows as he gave a smirk of confidence. The joking stopped abruptly as he furrowed his brow and shook his head in confusion. "But come to think of it, this one had no interest."

Growing up, there wasn't a woman in town who didn't fall under James's spell. With the fairer sex, rejection was not in James's vocabulary. Brody couldn't help but heckle him. "I'd like to meet this lady who didn't melt just looking at you. Especially if she was the one who gave you this pretty shiner."

Slapping him on the shoulder, James let out a chuckle. "I have a feeling you will and soon."