

MONTANA *Sky*

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LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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MONTANA SKY

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Dedication

First, to my faithful readers, whose support and faith keep me writing.

*Second, to Larry, light of my life and stirrer
of my soul, for whom I'm happy to obey*

1 Corinthians 7:10: "Let not the wife depart from her husband."

*Special mention to my wonderful editor,
Courtney, and the ever-capable Lois.*

*Finally, to my once abused, now spoiled dog, who put aside his Frisbee
addiction long enough for me to write these stories!*

Chapter One

Sky sensed the sniper's crosshairs centered between her eyebrows and crouched behind a boulder, one arm protectively encircling her Irish setter's neck. The last rifle shot, so recent that the scent of sulfur still hung in the air, had killed the she-wolf instantly. The dead wolf's lifeblood slowly seeped onto the parched earth beneath her as her cubs trembled in the open space between the carcass and Sky's refuge.

Sky estimated the pups at twelve to eighteen weeks...weaned, but far from old enough to survive the wilderness. They seemed to understand that cruel fact, and they whimpered pathetically, nudging and pawing at their mother's lifeless body. The mournful whining escalated as they learned one of life's hardest lessons: the cold finality of death. Too many times, Sky had been a student of that same cruel teacher, and she recognized the sorrow that burned in their round, golden eyes.

Pebbles cascaded down the rock face, and Sky knew it meant the gunman was repositioning himself up there, searching for the angle that would guarantee a successful triple wolf kill—and add thousands to his bank account. What the cubs needed more than anything else right now was time. Time to find their pack. Time to practice skills that would protect them from beast and nature and the most dangerous enemy of all: man.

But, for weeks, *The Messenger's* headlines had screamed, "Wolf Wars Rage between Animal Activists and Ranchers." Time was the one thing the cubs didn't have.

Sky looked into their sad, innocent eyes and swallowed hard. Chances of another she-wolf adopting them were slim, at best. And without a mother to protect them from pack hierarchy, they'd be outcasts, subject to slow, vicious deaths. Even the sniper's way was gentler than that.

But it didn't *have* to be an either-or outcome....

Her heart pounded with fear as she made a life-altering, possibly life-threatening decision. "Hey, little guys, it's gonna be all right," she said softly. "I won't let anything happen to you. I promise."

With heads cocked and ears pricked forward, they froze, stunned into terrified silence by their first direct encounter with the human voice.

The unmistakable crack of gunfire shattered the quiet end-of-summer morning, and the bullet stopped with a sickening *thoomp* in the bark of a nearby tree. The little wolves cowered near their mother's dead body. Without a moment's hesitation, Sky dumped out her backpack, grabbed one yowling cub, then the other, and stuffed them into the bag, zipping it up despite their terrified, confused cries.

She clapped her hands to summon her Irish setter. "Face, c'mere! Down, girl!" she ordered. Her ears flat against her head, the dog, unaccustomed to such harshness in her mistress's voice, immediately did as she was told.

Cringing, Sky hunkered down behind the boulder, put on the backpack so that it nestled against her chest, and secured its stabilizing strap across her lower back. The cubs squirmed near her heart as she began what was as near a belly-crawl as her whimpering front load allowed. Beside her, Face mimicked her movements. "*The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds,*" she whispered. "*The LORD upholds all who are falling...*" Sky sent a silent prayer of thanks heavenward that her dad had made her memorize Bible passages such as this one, Psalm 145:13–14. "Never know when one will comfort or give you hope," Wade Allen had always said.

Another bullet zinged past, creating a tiny cloud of dust as it embedded itself in the rocks beside them. From where she lay hiding, Sky could see the angle of the bullets. Being able to hit what you aimed at in these parts could make the difference between life and death. It was no accident, she knew, that the marksman had missed again. But murder wasn't his goal. *Her* dead body wasn't worth thousands of dollars to him.

Just yesterday, *The Messenger's* front page had read, "Rumored Wolf Bounties Reach Record Heights." Montana authorities, succumbing to pressure from powerful animal activist lobbies, had taken a hard line, threatening steep fines and jail time for anyone caught trading wolf skins for dollars. That fact underscored her assessment that the gunman's second and third shots had been intended only to scare her off, to enable him to finish the job—unwitnessed—and to exchange soft, warm bodies for cold, hard cash.

Sky crawled faster. Well-worn buckskin gloves protected her hands, but the elbows of her flannel shirt and the knees of her blue jeans were torn and bloodied by the time she reached her pickup. Oblivious to the cuts and scrapes, Sky reached up and opened the driver's door. Face didn't need an invitation; she immediately leapt into the cab. Sky was in the truck within seconds, the backpack still pressing against her chest. She drove like a maniac down Route 212, glancing in the rearview mirror every few seconds.

Through the windshield, Sky could see the fading glow of the moon, hanging high in the Montana morning sky, and recalled another Bible verse: "*Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth*" (Psalm 50:2). She found it hard to believe that the celestial view harbored a cold-blooded killer.

It seemed to take hours to drive the six winding miles home from the foothills. One last peek in the rearview mirror satisfied her that no one had followed. For the moment, at least, she and

the cubs were safe. But just in case, Sky gave the steering wheel a sudden jerk to the left, her tires creating a ten-foot wave of grit as they gripped gravel, before careening down the winding, tree-lined drive that connected her home with the rest of the world.

The shooter's vantage point had provided him numerous benefits, including the element of surprise. Now, Sky had an advantage of her own. During "The Frightening Fifties," as Gramps had dubbed them, her grandfather had built a bomb shelter that he had disguised as a tool shed. He'd equipped the underground room with every modern convenience of the day. Being virtually soundproof, it would be the perfect hiding place for her cubs.

Inside the shelter, she removed the backpack and put it gently on the floor. Then, slowly, so she wouldn't catch the cubs' wooly fur in the zipper's teeth, Sky opened it. Yawning, the cubs poked their pointy noses through the opening and timidly sniffed their surroundings.

The time they'd spent pressed against her must have sped up the acquaintanceship process, for they boldly trotted side by side, sniffing out the perimeter of the shelter before christening each corner with a small yellow puddle. "Going to need a lot of newspapers down here," Sky said, wrinkling her nose, "and there's not a moment to lose."

Her watch beeped. Seven o'clock. In two hours, her veterinary assistant would arrive to assist in neutering the calico. There was a lot to do between now and then to make the shelter a proper temporary home for the little wolves. Sky made four trips between the house and the shelter, her arms loaded with things that would ease their adjustment.

Never-used quilts, piled in the far corner, would serve as their bed. An old clock radio, set to an all-music inspirational station, would play soft melodies to soothe them when she couldn't be there. She replaced the harsh white ceiling bulb with a yellow bug

light that cast a warm, comforting glow. And after feeding them a hearty meal of warm, milk-softened dog chow, she filled a bucket with water for them to drink, then left to resume life as a small-town vet.

Though it was cool in the operating room, Sky was perspiring behind the sterile mask. Deft hands maneuvered scalpels and clamps as she mentally reviewed her decision to ready the cubs for a return to the wild. She knew precisely the level of commitment required to prepare them for freedom, because during her internship at the Atlanta Zoo, she'd worked with three wolf cubs brought back to the University of Georgia by students who'd gone hiking in Alaska. Back then, she and two other veterinary assistants had worked with the able yet aging Dr. Manfred Williams. This time, since complete secrecy was the only way Sky could guarantee the cubs' safety, she'd bear the time-consuming responsibility alone.

When she had returned home after the end of her workday, Sky sat down on the shelter floor and quietly invited the cubs to come to her. She knew that if they were to learn how to fend for themselves in the wild, they must transfer dependence on their mother to dependence on her. But they didn't budge. Side by side, they sat on the thick, old quilt, each keeping a wary eye on her.

Sky talked—a lot. To God. To Face. To them. The sooner they grew accustomed to the sound of her voice, the sooner they'd associate it with food and comfort. But much to Sky's dismay, neither cub came near her.

At the end of that frightening, frustrating, fascinating day, she slept the hard, deep sleep of the exhausted and awoke before the alarm buzzed at five. Instantly wide awake, she felt like a child on Christmas morning who'd asked Santa for a puppy. Sky dressed hurriedly and headed for the shelter, balancing a mug of steaming coffee on the hard-backed journal in which she'd track the cubs' progress. They didn't cower when she entered the room. Rather, they stood on all fours, heads

low and eyes staring as she poured food and water into stainless-steel bowls. Sky refused to step aside once their meal had been prepared.

"*He opens their ears to instruction,*" she said, quoting Job 36:10. Her voice was gentle but stern when she added, "Cause this is the way it has to be if you're to get what you need!" For several moments, the pair blinked their eyes and licked their lips. By five-thirty, they'd edged forward, one cautious step at a time, to eat their moist breakfast.

Sky yearned to tousle their thick, soft fur. To hug their fuzzy necks. To pat their flat little foreheads. "All in good time," she said, taking her affections out on Face, who greedily ate up the attention. "When I get back," she told them as she closed the door shut, "you guys are going to get some proper names. What do you think of that?"

Doggy brows rose and ears pricked forward in response to her question. The cubs' expressions made it hard to stay put. She wanted to stoop down and gather them up in a big, rough-and-tumble hug. "Let's go to town," she told Face, locking the cubs in the safe solitude of the shelter, "and get those pups some real food."

Face understood the word *town*, and because she loved riding in the truck, she bounded toward it at top speed, her high-pitched, excited bark leading the way.

"Patience," Sky told the dog, as her father had often told her, "is obviously one virtue you don't possess."



When Martha Peebles' 1957 red Cadillac rolled up in front of The Grainery at eight, Sky had already been waiting on the old green porch swing for fifteen minutes. "G'mornin'," her old friend said. "Now, ain't you the early bird today!"

Sky grinned. "*The way of a sluggard is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway,*" she quoted Proverbs 15:19. "Someone very wise taught me that at least twenty years ago."

The hoarse sound of Martha's laughter tickled Sky's ears, just as it always had. "Wise, my foot!" she said. "It's just plain good sense, is what it is."

Inside, as Sky piled the items on her list onto the worn, red-flecked Formica counter, Martha gossiped. If it had been any other way, Sky would have felt something important was missing. Half an hour later, Sky was paying for her supplies when a blue-jeaned cowboy slipped up and tugged a lock of her hair. "Well, I'll be. If it ain't Sky Allen."

She turned and met the clear blue eyes of her childhood friend. "Dale Rivers," she warned, returning his teasing grin, "you'd better have your running shoes laced up real tight if you plan to do that again."

Thumbing his black Stetson to the back of his head, Dale laughed. "Shoo-eee," he tooted. "Just like when we were young'uns...still full of spunk." With that, he reached out and tweaked her cheek.

Sky responded to his playfulness as she had since both she and Dale were four years old and put on a false show of fury. "I'll thank you to keep your mangy mitts to yourself, cowboy."

"And you're still as cute as all get-out when you're riled." But this time, when Dale reached for her, a large, tanned hand clamped around his wrist and stopped it in midair. "I think your hat must be too tight, Rivers," said a gravelly male voice, "and it's affecting more than your hearing."

His grin still intact, Dale said, "Relax, Chet. Sky knows I was just funnin'."

Sky glared, for real this time, at the so-called white knight who'd interrupted her reunion with Dale.

"Can't you see the little lady wants to be left alone?"

Little lady indeed! Sky hadn't needed a man to protect her since her father had been killed, nearly ten years ago. For an unblinking moment, she stared at Chet Cozart, owner of Four Aces Ranch—and Dale's boss. She'd heard a lot about this man in the weeks she'd been back in town, but this was her first face-to-face glimpse of the ex-rodeo star.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she inventoried the man who had taken it upon himself to be her rescuer: jet-black hair, sun-bronzed skin, and eyes that silently, broodingly said, "I know what's best for you." Sky knew it would be pointless to tell the big lummoX she'd dealt with Dale's tomfoolery every summer day of her young life, so she turned on her heel and stomped away without so much as a howdy-do.

"What's gotten into *you*?" she heard Dale ask as she reached the door. "Sky's been like a sister to me since we were knee-high to gophers. Why—"

"Well," interrupted the in-charge voice, "try and mind your manners from here on out."

Sky slammed The Grainery's screen door, clenched her teeth, and headed for the skid that Martha had loaded beside her truck. "'Can't you see the little lady wants to be left alone?'" she muttered, mocking his slow drawl.

As she stacked cases of canned dog food onto the truck, she pictured him: jeans that hugged muscular thighs, a cuffed white shirt that exposed beefy forearms, dark-lashed, glittering gray eyes....

Dale's happy-go-lucky words interrupted her reverie. "You've been in town for weeks. Why haven't you made time for your old buddy? You want folks to think you're still mad about that nickname?"

It said "Lottie Marie Allen" on her birth certificate, but thanks to Dale, everybody called her Sky. What had started out as an

innocent game of peekaboo with a bear cub had ended abruptly when its mama bear had appeared...and treed then ten-year-old Sky. If not for Dale, yelling as he banged a soup ladle on a pot, only God knew how long she'd have clung to that old pine. "Bet you can touch the sky," he'd teased once his noisemaking had scared off the bear; "think I'll call you 'Sky-High Lottie' from now on." Before her feet had touched ground, he'd abbreviated it to just plain "Sky," and the name had stuck.

Sky filed the sweet memory away and stepped into Dale's outstretched, welcoming arms.

"Well, why didn't you call me?" he asked.

The decision to return to Mountain Gate hadn't been an easy one. She'd put off looking up old friends, afraid and uncertain about the memories each reunion might conjure. "I've been awfully busy setting up the clinic," she explained. "Besides, since when do you need an invitation?"

Grinning, he glanced at his watch. "Shoo-eee! I'd better get a move on before Chet fires me and you end up supporting my sorry self." He dropped a brotherly kiss on her cheek and, walking backwards, added, "Tell ya what. I'll pick you up at five, take you to our favorite restaurant. My treat." With that, he disappeared into the cowboy crowd near The Grainery's porch steps.

Sky hopped up onto the pickup's tailgate to rearrange supplies on the truck bed. Mentally, she listed Mountain Gate's eateries: the Silver Bullet Diner and Big Jim's Beef-o-Rama. As kids, she and Dale and little Ella Houghton had spent a lot of time at Big Jim's. The summer they turned twelve, the trio started a business called "Anything for a Buck." Together, they shoveled manure, mowed lawns, babysat kids and dogs and even a goldfish or two—and spent every penny of their earnings on Big Jim's burgers and fries. She was still smiling to herself when she noticed his reflection in the truck's rear window.

Dale, she thought, grinning, *back for more fun and games*. In the mirror-like glass, she saw his arm rise up, reach out.... If the big goof thought he'd get a second chance to pull her hair, he had another thing coming!

She'd meant only to slap his hand away. Instead, the back of her hand met his left eyebrow and sent him sprawling. Her father had always said she was as strong as an ox. "Don't know your own strength," he'd tease in a perfect Bullwinkle imitation. She started to tell Dale she hadn't intended to knock him down, but she stopped short when she saw that it wasn't Dale but her would-be rescuer. Chet had looked powerful and intimidating in The Grainery. Now, sitting there in the dust, he seemed small and vulnerable, and the sight tweaked a maternal chord in Sky's heart. She jumped down onto the ground, landing squarely on both booted feet, shook her hand, and feigned pain. "Whew! That's some hard head you've got there," she said.

He touched his already-reddening left brow as a slow grin slanted his thick, dark mustache.

Sky rested gloved fists on her hips. "I'm sorry, but if you hadn't snuck up on me—"

"—and if you hadn't been up on that tailgate...." His grin broadened.

"Guess I did have the upper hand...."

"You pack quite a wallop...for a woman."

Ignoring his sexist remark, Sky stuck out her hand to help him up. Taking it, he unfolded all six feet and three inches of him. "No hard feelings?"

"Nah." He brushed street grime from the seat of his jeans as she lifted the last bag of cedar chips from the skid. "But if you'd-a popped Rivers this way in there," he suggested, gesturing toward the store, "maybe I wouldn't have felt obliged to protect you."

The sack hit the truck bed harder than Sky had intended, splitting the bag and scattering sweet-smelling wood curls across the liner. Chet's tone, the way he casually leaned against her fender, that smart-alecky lift of his slightly-swollen left brow.... "If you'd bothered to ask," she snapped, dark eyes flashing, "I'd have told you I didn't need protecting."

His right forefinger drew a small circle in the air. Sky thought for a moment that he was about to point it at her before diving into some kind of male chauvinist lecture. Instead, he touched his swollen brow, winced, and pushed his black cowboy hat to the back of his head. "Don't I know it."

Stubbornly, Sky stretched to her full five-foot-nine-inch height and set her jaw. *If it's a staring contest he wants, she decided, I aim to win it.* To her relief, he blinked and looked away first.

He held out his hand. "Name's Chet. Chet Cozart."

"Sky Allen," she said, pumping his arm.

The casual get-acquainted touch became a crackling connection that sizzled between gloved palms and traveled on an invisible current that fused brown eyes to gray. "Guess I'll see you around," he said, releasing her hand. He turned around as if to head back to The Grainery but swiveled on his heels.

"Say...what do you need with all that dog food? Your dog here," he said, patting Face's head, "is as slim as a dime." Face nuzzled his gloved hand. When he bent down to pet her, she slurped his chin.

Her heart pounding, Sky licked her lips. If he'd been the rifleman in the foothills, he already knew why she'd purchased so much dog food. "Maybe you haven't heard, but I'm a veterinarian...."

The mustache slanted again, this time in a cocky smirk. "Yeah, I've heard." He shrugged one shoulder. "What's one thing got to do with the other?"

Those clear gray eyes seemed friendly. Inviting, even. And just intimidating enough to be the eyes of a sharpshooter. "I can't very well let my patients starve while they're at my clinic, now, can I?"

His puffy left brow arched as he considered her answer. Then, sliding his hat forward again, Chet saluted. "If you say so." Then, "Have a nice day, now, y'hear?"

She teetered between fear and fury until she noticed his limp and wondered what horrible accident had marred his otherwise perfect physique. She slammed the truck's tailgate shut, grabbed the rusty, metal skid's handle, and rolled the skid alongside the others near The Grainery's steps. Martha knew everything about everyone in Mountain Gate. After a few well-aimed questions in her direction, Sky would know exactly what had caused Chet's limp.

And if Sky knew anything about Martha, she'd probably learn a lot more than that!