

## What Others Are Saying About Loree Lough and *Guardians of the Heart...*

Thanks to *Guardians of the Heart*, I'm an official Loree Lough fan! She has the magic touch when telling a story. I really enjoy the way she gives her characters life and a voice. I always find myself immersed immediately in her books. Her gifted presentation of dialogue is amazing. I read other authors daily, and I am making all of Loree Lough's novels a priority now.

—Doran Ingram

SAG/AFTRA Actor

Author, *Blood Brothers*, *Dark Secret*, and other reader favorites in  
The Mark Ingram Adventures series

Author Loree Lough's latest novel, *Guardians of the Heart*, challenges us all with the age-old question: "Can you think of one person who has no regrets?" In it, Loree takes us on a journey of discovery as Nell and Asa try to camouflage deeply hidden secrets. You do not want to miss this book!

—Kevin James O'Neill

Writer and director, Olive Ranch Road Productions

Loree Lough has long been a favorite author among readers. She never fails to deliver memorable stories packed with emotion. Her latest novels in the Secrets on Sterling Street series are no exception. Truly, you will always remember a Loree story.

—Andrea Boeshaar

Editor, writing coach, and best-selling author of the acclaimed  
Fabric of Time series

Loree Lough has done it again—penned yet another story about letting go of the past and loving in the present. With beautiful historical touches, *Guardians of the Heart* takes readers on a journey that many men and women need to take, from hiding secrets to guarding each other's hearts under God's watchful eye.

—Robin Bayne

Award-winning author of the Gardner's Gazebo series: *Prodigal*, *Samaritan*, and *Christmas Pearl*

Weaving faith seamlessly into her stories, award-winning author Loree Lough gives images of grace and forgiveness that are compelling and heartwarming as she mixes them with a healthy dose of love. Secrets impose a heavy weight on one's heart, and she illustrates that truth beautifully as well as she does the joy of having that burden relieved. Lough brings surprises around every corner, keeping the reader intrigued, satisfied, and glad to have spent the time within the pages of her novel.

—Susan M. Baganz

Author, *Pesto and Potholes*

From the first sentence, I was hooked on Loree Lough's newest novel, *Guardians of the Heart*. The title alone speaks volumes, bringing to mind the biblical admonition to guard one's heart. Loree's writing is engaging, and her hero and heroine, Asa Stone and Nell Holstrom, are captivating characters. With this fresh storyline, readers will not be disappointed. Loree always comes

through, offering inspiring stories that keep getting better and better.

—Rita Gerlach

Author of the Daughters of the Potomac series

In *Guardians of the Heart*, Loree Lough has woven a Western of heart-rending proportions, as hero, Asa Stone, seeks to keep the dark secret from his past hidden from the heroine, Nell Holstrom. Asa and Nell's journey is proof that love and faith can restore what is thought to be lost, and foster new beginnings. I found myself devouring every word to find out where the story would lead. If you enjoy Westerns with strong heroines and battle-wounded heroes, look no further!

—Cerella Sechrist

Author, *The Paris Connection* and *Love Finds You in Hershey, Pennsylvania*

Along a road of tragedy and triumphs, we follow Nell as she sparkles with pioneer spirit in the frontier town of Denver, Colorado. The young woman encounters quandaries and unanswered questions regarding her employer, Asa, who hides deep and disturbing secrets while appearing to be a good and moral man. But their employer/employee relationship could alter both their lives, if they can overcome the regrets of the past to bring the opportunity for a new and joyful life. *Guardians of the Heart* is sure to please fans of Western fiction.

—Elaine Fields Smith

Author/publisher, *Ridin' Around: Taillights in Chrome, 8-Tracks on Wheels* and the inspirational novella *The Perfect Place of Knowledge*

Engaging and suspenseful, with an unforgettable cast of characters and a plot that keeps the pages turning, Loree Lough's latest novel, *Guardians of the Heart*, is a masterful collaboration of history, romance, redemption, and forgiveness. A must-read for every historical romance fan!

—Rachel Muller

Best-selling author, *Letters from Grace*

I thoroughly enjoyed *Guardians of the Heart*. Loree Lough knows exactly when to throw in a twist here or a surprise there to keep readers fully engaged. I found myself hoping for the best for Nell and Asa, and fearing any mishap that might come their way; just as I felt the two were settling on a predictable path, Loree turned their entire world upside down! It was refreshing to fade back in time to an era when struggles were very real and life could be harsh, yet the triumph of spirit overcame obstacles for those with dogged natures. Loree Lough is a genre-bending, talented storyteller whose multi-layered characters ring true. Call me a romantic, but I want to read more of her uplifting stories.

—T. C. Miller

Author, the Black Star Ops series, including *BlackJack Bomber*  
and *Black Star Bay*

# GUARDIANS OF THE HEART

LOREE LOUGH



WHITAKER  
HOUSE

*Publisher's Note:*

This novel is a work of fiction. References to real events, organizations, or places are used in a fictional context. Any resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV®, © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

**GUARDIANS OF THE HEART**  
**Secrets on Sterling Street ~ Book 2**

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A decorative illustration featuring a winding vine with several five-petaled flowers and leaves. The design is light gray and occupies the upper half of the page, partially framing the title.

## *Dedication*

This novel is dedicated to anyone, anywhere, who has ever worried that the secrets of the past will cast shadows on the present or the future: *“Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: ‘Here am I’”* (Isaiah 58:9 NIV).

It’s also dedicated to handsome young actor Taylor Kitsch, who served as the visual model for my hero, Asa Stone.

A decorative border featuring a light gray vine with several five-petaled flowers and leaves, curving across the top and right side of the page.

## Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my talented writer friend Rachel Muller for suggesting that I offer "Secondary Character Roles in the Novel" as prizes in a fund-raiser for her children's school. Thanks to the funds they contributed via the auction, the DiMaggio and Held families of Mt. Airy, Maryland, became an integral part of the story and helped make it more realistic, believable, and fun. Thanks, too, to Janet Marie Dowell, who, as winner of a separate random drawing in *Loree Lough & Friends* (an uber-fun, friendly Facebook group), became the town librarian and the heroine's best friend, adding yet another layer of warmth and realism to the story.

Also, a very special thanks to Robert Crutchfield, Senior Pastor of the Compassion Church in Katy, Texas, editor of *Faith That Inspires Action*, and author of *The First Responders Prayer* used in the First Responders series novels. He has also written many faith-moving sermons, and he graciously gave me permission to quote portions of one of them in *Guardians of the Heart*. And when he found out that a family emergency required our beloved Pastor Truett to leave the church in Denver, Robert also agreed to become a character in this novel...and the next!



## *A Note from the Author*

A decorative illustration featuring a light gray vine with several five-petaled flowers and leaves, swirling across the upper right portion of the page.

Dear Reader,

Close your eyes for a moment, take a deep breath, and try to picture just one person in your life who doesn't have regrets, sad memories, or a secret that has the power to darken even her happiest mood.

Couldn't think of one, could you?

That's because every human who ever walked this planet has done something he or she is sorry for. (Well, except for *one*, and I think you know who He is!)

We all know how uncomfortable secrets can make us feel, even at the slightest threat of having them exposed. But did you know that the damage caused by keeping secrets is not limited to the metaphysical realm?

Studies have shown that when the brain's prefrontal cortex (responsible for reminding you how awful it would be if your secret was exposed) communicates with the cingulated cortex (which activates the fight-or-flight response), stress hormones are released. Blood pressure rises. The gastrointestinal tract releases acids. Memory is impacted, and sleep patterns change. Guilt provokes supersensitive or argumentative behavior. There's an oft-quoted, anonymous saying that goes, "You're only as sick as your secrets."

Thankfully, we need not be prisoners of our secrets. Carl Bard has said, "Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending." Like

many of us, the protagonists of this story, Nell and Asa, are working hard to guard the secrets of their hearts. Whether they decide to fess up or keep mum, one thing is sure: The Father knows every secret of His children's hearts. In the words of the apostle Paul, *"We have renounced secret and shameful ways...for God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ"* (2 Corinthians 4:2, 6 NIV).

My wish for you, dear reader, is that you will open every dark corner of your heart to the Lord so that you may experience the joy of His merciful light.

Blessings to you and yours,  
Loree

## Chapter One

11:00 p.m., November 28, 1864 • Near Fort Lyons, Colorado

**F**ourteen-year-old Asa pulled up the collar of his too-thin jacket and willed his teeth to stop chattering. Four months ago, he'd tried to talk his way out of joining the Colorado Volunteers, but he hadn't stood a chance against his big, determined pa. When he saw how much pain his father was willing to inflict on his three older brothers, he'd quietly pledged allegiance to Colonel John Chivington's Third Regiment.

Oh, what he wouldn't give to go back in time to the little house on the outskirts of Denver that always smelled of fresh-baked bread, where he'd never gone hungry and never felt cold, thanks to his ma's talent for turning scraps of cloth into warm quilts.

None of his fellow cavalrymen—nearly seven hundred in number—was complaining about the biting wind or the skin-stinging snow pellets. But then, they'd all been swigging whiskey since long before this latest march had begun. Some might have been drinking to stay warm, but Asa believed most of them were hoping a gutful of tangle-leg would dull any fears of becoming the next victim of Chivington's bloodlust.

About halfway into the seven-hour march, Asa overheard a handful of men whispering about the Treaty of Fort Laramie of '51, which had pretty much negated every promise the U.S.

government had made to the tribes in the Treaty of Fort Wise. One man opined that Black Kettle, White Antelope, and other Cheyenne chiefs didn't trust the whites, but that, desperate to secure hunting lands for their starving people, they'd reluctantly agreed to winter near the south bend of Big Sandy Creek.

"I hear-tell them Ind'ans are all sick as dogs," one soldier said, "so they sent their healthiest bucks in search of food."

"Yep, I heard the same," a third man agreed. "Also heard Chivington say that'll make easy pickin's of them that's left."

"And he won't tolerate no excuses," added the first, "iffen any Ind'ans are still breathin' when it's over."

The words sent chills up Asa's spine, and he sought out his brothers to get their take on things. It surprised him when even Chester, the oldest and the toughest, looked just as scared and disgusted as Asa felt.

"They're all drunker than skunks," Asa whispered. "We could belly-crawl south awhile, then make a run for it. Why, I'll bet we could be halfway home before they even notice we're—"

His pa stepped out of the shadows, filled both his meaty fists with bunches of Asa's threadbare jacket, and lifted him off his feet. Nose to nose with his youngest son, Daniel hissed, "Desertion?"

Asa turned away to avoid his father's baleful glare, as well as his rank, boozy breath.

"Can't even look me in the eye, can you, coward?" he growled, turning Asa loose with a blow that sent him sprawling into the snow.

"You'll stand and fight, same as the rest of us, you hear me?" Daniel aimed a forefinger at Asa, then at three two brothers. "Same goes for you, and you, and you." He glanced over his shoulder, where a half dozen officers were orchestrating a line of artillery aimed at the all-quiet Indian camp. "You're lucky no one else heard you, or I'd-a had no choice but to shoot the lot of you, right where you stand."

Asa scrambled to his feet and deliberately stood apart from his brothers.

"They had nothing to do with it, Pa. I was just telling them what I heard the other men saying. Don't hardly seem right, sneaking up on the camp. The Indians are just doin' what the government told 'em to. Besides, they're sick, and it's just old folks, women, and young'uns, since most of the men are off huntin'—"

"Don't matter how old they are or whether they wear skirts or trousers. They're *Injuns*, you stupid boy. That's all the reason we need to kill 'em." Daniel took one step forward, and all four of his sons flinched. "I'll say this just once: Try to run, I'll put a bullet in you, myself."

Asa's mouth went dry, and he glanced at his brothers.

"Do you believe I'd do it?"

Chester took off his cap and ran a shaky hand through his dark waves of hair. "Yes, Pa. I do believe you would."

Duncan hung his head, and Edgar nodded.

Now Daniel aimed that fierce gaze at Asa. "And what about you, coward? Do you believe I'd shoot a deserter, even if he was my own son?"

"Yessir," he said, rubbing his still-throbbing jaw. "Ain't a doubt in my mind that you would."

For an instant, Asa got a glimpse of the man who'd patiently explained how to drive a nail with one strike of the hammer, the man who'd cried while burying the family dog. Where was that man now?

"Next time I see you boys, you'd better be belly-down in a rifle pit, aimin' your Springfields at them *Injuns* and shootin' like you mean it!"

The hours that followed seemed to Asa like a hazy nightmare; and when he came out of hiding the following afternoon, the air was heavy with the scent of gunpowder and blood. The war whoops and screams of women and children had fallen silent,

but Asa knew nothing would quiet his memories of the guttural moans of the dying, some of them pleading with the murder-hungry soldiers to spare their lives.

He fought the urge to retch as, in search of his pa and brothers, he was forced to step over and around the scalps and entrails of slaughtered warriors. Then he saw Chester, down on his knees in the blood-soaked snow. He'd taken a round to the shoulder, but Asa knew instantly that it wasn't the injury that had painted the ferocious expression on his eldest brother's face.

"Look what you've done," Chester growled.

Edgar cradled their father's head in his lap. "You've killed Pa."

Anguish and fear roiled in his gut as he stared in slack-jawed shock at his father's lifeless body. But how could he have killed his pa, even by accident, when he hadn't joined them in the rifle pit? He hadn't aimed or fired a single shot.

"One more gun might have made the difference," Chester snarled, answering his unspoken question, "but you ran like a scared schoolgirl. Ran and hid behind a rock." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "And now, Pa and Duncan are both dead."

*Duncan, too?* Asa followed Chester's gaze and recognized the black and brown scarf—one of the last gifts their mother had made for Duncan before she died—fluttering in the cold breeze.

A quaking started in his boots and quickly climbed all the way to his scalp, and Asa knew the temperature hadn't caused it.

In the next moment, his brothers pounced on him like wildcats, scratching and growling, kicking and hissing. But Asa didn't lift a finger to defend himself, because Chester and Edgar were right. He'd earned the beating. When they tired of pummeling him, the brothers stood, oblivious to the confused stares of cavalrymen milling nearby.

"Better get to crawlin' on outta here like the spineless snake you are," Edgar said. "If the colonel gets word that you deserted, he'll hang you, sure as you're standin' there."

"But not before he skins you, like he done them outlaws awhile back," Chester added.

The scene flashed in Asa's mind of those men—accused of robbing settlements, wagon trains, and banks—being rounded up and manacled, then butchered and left for the coyotes and vultures. In Chivington's twisted mind, they weren't worth the time or effort that would be required to bring them back to stand trial.

Asa had never known a fear that was more raw or real. Nor had he known such self-revulsion. Was Chester right? If he'd stayed and fought, could his participation have made the difference between life and death for his pa and Duncan?

Aching from head to toe, humiliated, cold, and more alone than he'd felt since his ma's passing, Asa started walking. He didn't stop until three days later, when he passed out from hunger, exposure, and exhaustion.



*April 15, 1883 • Denver, Colorado*

Shortly after sunup, Nell Holstrom passed through the heavy wrought-iron gate of the cemetery, cradling five bouquets of Granny's Bonnet in the crook of her arm. The winter had been hard on the zigzagging brick path, and she took care to avoid tripping on the sharp edges that protruded from the dirt.

On her way to the far corner, she passed a child-sized stone angel sitting atop a rounded headstone, then a ten-foot obelisk, three intricately carved crosses, and a giant clamshell. If she'd had the money to afford elaborate memorials, would she have immortalized her loved ones that way? Not likely, because they'd been simple people who'd lived simple lives. Anything more than an unembellished stone would have made their strict frugality a lie.

The path ended where the low-hanging branches of an Engelmann spruce shaded a small group of plain markers. She brushed away the crisp leaves and pine needles that covered their names, birthdates, and deaths, and replaced them with flowers—blue for her grandpa, pa, and brother; pink for her mother and grandma.

Many of those who'd suffered the hardships of mining were rewarded with great wealth. The Holstrom Mine, on the other hand, gave nothing and took everything and everyone. Her pa, the last to go, had held fast to his belief—even as a sobbing Nell had scrambled to free him from the dirt and rocks and rotting wood trapping him—that, one day, the family claim would prove the naysayers wrong. He hadn't used his last breath to say good-bye or to tell her he loved her. Instead, he'd told her where to find charges, maps, and a small cache of gold to help her get by until she uncovered the vein.

If he truly had left money and other treasures in the tumble-down shack, she would not be the one to find them, because on the day Nell had laid him to rest, she'd vowed never return to the detestable place that had turned first her grandpa and then her pa into men so obsessed with striking it rich that no sacrifice was too great. As much as she loved them, Nell also hated them for allowing their greed to make her an orphan.

Her mission fulfilled, Nell got to her feet and brushed the dirt from her skirt. While it was true that she had no living relatives, God had blessed her with a loving church family, as well as friends who'd become almost as important as the people buried here.

But self-pity never got anyone anywhere. And life had taught her that the only way to smother it was through hard work and good deeds. She had mastered the "hard work" part, thanks to her job at the DiMaggios' store, as well as the eighteen months it had taken her to transform Joe's unused tool shed into the warm and cozy cottage she called home.



Any day now, she would put the “good deeds” part into action as never before, because when the grocer’s mother-in-law arrived, Nell would have to give up her job and the cottage, too. She understood that the grieving widow needed some occupation to fill her lonely hours. And, having shared many Sunday dinners with the DiMaggio family, Nell knew they couldn’t fit even one more person into the cramped apartment above their store. What choice did they have but to move the poor woman into the cottage?

Joe had given her a small sum as reimbursement for the work she’d done to the interior and exterior, for the cast-off furniture she’d refinished, and for the curtains she’d sewn, all on her own time and at her own expense. But good jobs were scarce. Would the money tide her over until she found new employment and another place to live?

Nell glanced at her father’s headstone and fought tears, remembering how he’d used the last of his strength to tell her that if she were to pry up a certain floorboard under his rickety cot, she’d find a small sack of nuggets and a stack of folding money. Had that been the truth, or merely the ramblings of a dying man? Hopefully, she’d never feel so desperate that she’d need to go back there and find out, one way or the other.

She said a prayer for his soul—and for the soul of every Holstrom buried near him—before leaving the graveyard with her chin held high. There wasn’t time for regrets. She needed a job and a room to rent.

Shop by shop, Nell made her way through town, inquiring in every store, regardless of whether there was a “Help Wanted” poster in the window. She refused to give up because, surely, in a city the size of Denver, an able-bodied, honest person who was willing to work hard could find work and a place to live!

Regrettably, it seemed no one was hiring. Few things scared Nell more than the prospect of being homeless and destitute. She sat on the steps of the bank, held her head in her hands, and

tried to pray. She'd said countless prayers for others but couldn't remember the last time she'd prayed for herself. Did she even remember how?

*Lord, You have always provided for my most basic needs, every day of my life. All I ask now is that You would lead me to a job that will put a roof over my head and food in my stomach. Anything more than that, I'll consider a blessed gift from—*

The sound of fluttering of paper drew her attention to the bulletin board behind her. Nell stood, thinking to secure the flyer before the spring winds sent it sailing down the street. Smoothing it flat, she read the words printed upon it.

### IMMEDIATE OPENING

Experienced Housekeeper and Cook

See Asa Stone, Proprietor, Stone Hill Inn on Sterling Street

Her heart pounding, Nell grabbed the advertisement and stuffed it inside the front pocket of her jacket. All her life, she'd heard people say that God worked in mysterious ways. Could this be His answer to her prayer for a job *and* a home?