

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

“When it comes to writing captivating stories packed with compelling characters and pulse-pounding excitement, award-winning author Loree Lough always delivers. Her books are like the perfect potato chip: once you try one, you’ll want to devour them all. *Healing of the Heart* will definitely leave you wanting more!”

—Torry Martin

Comedian, screenwriter, actor, and author, *Of Moose and Men*

“Ruby McCoy and Rex Truett are both battling demons from the past. As always, Loree Lough weaves their stories together masterfully so that with each turn of the page, readers are more invested in the outcome of *Healing of the Heart*.”

—Sandra D. Bricker

Author of Live-Out-Loud Fiction, including
All I Want for Christmas

“*Healing of the Heart*, book three of Secrets on Sterling Street, makes for a brilliant addition to the series. Lough’s descriptive narrative and delightful, often comical, dialogue pull us into the story. Sparks fly between Rex, the hard-shelled sheriff, and Ruby, the gutsy, gorgeous heroine. This fast-paced, absorbing read will have you flipping those pages into the wee morning hours. Don’t miss it!”

—Sharlene MacLaren

Author, Tennessee Dreams series and *Summer on Sunset Ridge*

“Loree Lough never lets me down. Every story, every word—every book is crafted to perfection. And *Healing of the Heart* is no different. When Ruby McCoy has to learn to live with the atrocities of her father, she sets out to right the wrongs as best she can. This heartfelt, touching story teaches us the value of making the effort to do what is right. Loree Lough nails it in *Healing of the Heart*. In this must-read novel, Lough proves that goodness, kindness, and love always prevail.”

—Cindy Sproles

Award-winning author, *Mercy's Rain*

“Loree Lough has once again brought the emotional intensity and passion of the West to life in her riveting historical romance, *Healing of the Heart*. With themes of forgiveness, righting wrongs done by others, and love that can wipe away the sins the past, this book explores all of that in the midst of the fierce and deadly beauty of Colorado in the late 1800s. A story to treasure more than once.”

—Susan M. Baganz

Author, *Pesto & Potholes*, *Salsa & Speedbumps*,
Feta & Freeways, and *Fragile Blessings*

“In *Healing of the Heart*, Loree Lough plumbs the recesses of the human psyche to spin a haunting tale. Sheriff Rex Truett must decide if he is courageous enough to trust his growing love for Ruby McCoy or continue to cling to his hatred for her outlaw father. Nothing is more terrifying for a human than to love, and Rex's broken heart has no room for trust. A thought-provoking read.”

—Catherine Lanigan

Author, Shores of Indian Lake series from
Harlequin Heartwarming

“Loree Lough consistently presents readers—both men and women—with intriguing stories, characters that ring true, and historical accuracy. Her protagonists face trials that would stop most people dead in their tracks, yet they push on with faith and determination. Attention to historical detail, yes; skilled writer, yes; but above all, a masterful storyteller whose lyrical style brings fiction to life.”

—T. C. Miller

Author, BlackStar Ops Group series

“This summer, my family and I toured central Colorado, the setting for *Healing of the Heart*. I was not surprised to confirm that Loree’s dedication to accuracy was spot-on! Her attention to details for background and history lend depth and authenticity to the story. If you ever have the chance, tour the area and get the ‘Lough down’ on the historical settings of her Western tales. As we have come to expect, this novel is populated by characters who are enchanting and engaging. Loree never disappoints...except when we have to reach ‘The End.’”

—Travis M. Inman

Author, *Shadows* and *The Glenfield* series

“Loree Lough does it again with *Healing of the Heart*. Another moving and uplifting story with characters so real they feel like family, a plot that keeps you turning pages, and a setting so quaint it makes you want to move to Fairplay, Colorado.”

—Joya Fields

Award-winning author, *Beneath the Surface*

“This just might be my favorite story by Loree Lough. Her characters, driven by noble motives, endure hardships that can’t crush their budding emotions. *Healing of the Heart* is romance, faith, and mystery in one page-turning story.”

—Robin Bayne

Author, *The Gardner’s Gazebo* series

“Loree Lough’s stories are always so beautifully realized with edgy characters that create a wonderfully gripping story. Once you start, you won’t be able to put this book down!”

—*Kevin James O’Neill*

Writer, director, and producer
Olive Ranch Road Productions

LOREE LOUGH

HEALING OF THE
HEART

Secrets on Sterling Street



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.

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HEALING OF THE HEART
Secrets on Sterling Street ~ Book 3

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Dedication

While visiting me one day, my youngest granddaughter looked up at the shelves that hold my published books. She climbed into my lap and said, “Why don’t you put me into a story, Grandmom?”

“What kind of story?” I asked.

“Something exciting! Something I’ll remember for my whole entire life!”

Well, sweet Payton, here it is. I put as much of *me* into this story as I could, too: good people and bad, joy and sadness, pride and disappointment...and the peace that comes from knowing you are cherished and loved.

But just so you know...my love for you, Payton, and your cousins is never-ending; you’ll pass it on to your children, and they’ll pass it to their children. Just think of it! Every person who interacts with you—and your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—will feel that love. It will change them and the world for the better as they share it with *their* friends and family, creating a chain of love that began with us.

It means the story of our family’s love will live forever and always, long, long after we die and go to heaven. Now really, how wonderful is that?

Love you bunches, cupcake,
Grandmom

A Note from the Author

Dear Readers:

If you're like me, friends confide in you from time to time. Small things, like intentionally cutting someone off in traffic. Mediocre things, like harsh words spoken to someone who didn't deserve it. And occasionally, very big secrets that come with a whispered warning of all the horrible, life-altering things that will happen if you let the proverbial cat out of the bag. As if that isn't pressure enough, you're often put in the position of refuting or confirming your friend's story by a third party—without exposing the secret, *and* without telling a lie. At that point, you're probably wishing you hadn't promised to keep the secret or, better yet, that your friend would just 'fess up!

Long before Webster defined *secret* as, "Something that is kept or meant to be kept unknown or unseen by others," God said "...every work [will come] into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

And yet, knowing this, we frail humans still continue to devise—and keep—secrets. Aren't we an odd lot?

I hope that, as you read about Rex and Ruby each guarding their own dark secrets, you'll root for them to step out in faith, to trust that the Almighty will guide their words and actions and show them the way to acceptance and forgiveness...of themselves, and of others. Without Him, we are all doomed to live in the shadows cast by secrets.

All my best and blessings to you, dear reader!

Loree

Chapter One

Baltimore, Maryland • February, 1879

During the three-hour ride from the family farm to the city, Rex Truett and his father had gone round and round about who'd pay for his new duds. As usual, his big-hearted, stubborn pa got the last word, calling it an investment in his only son's future.

So if Rex got the job, he'd have two people to thank: Abigail, for nagging her father into considering him as the manager of Baltimore's elegant Harbor Inn, and his pa, for buying the clothes that allowed him to look the part. The position promised a respectable salary and a fully furnished, rent-free apartment near the lobby.

It felt good, knowing that if things worked out, he could repay his pa for the clothes and a whole lot more. Wouldn't old Joe McGraw the banker be surprised when he came to collect the deed to the Truett land, and Rex handed him the amount due, instead!

He browsed the merchandise and chose a stiff-collared white shirt and pinstriped gray suit, then stacked them beside the cash register and sat on a tufted bench to try on a pair of black leather boots. He'd no sooner toed off the old ones when he heard gunshots—dozens of them—coming from the bank next door.

Rex bolted for the door in bare feet to check on his pa. As he slid to a stop in the doorway, a hardwood splinter embedded in the tender skin of his instep. Ignoring the discomfort, Rex poked his head out. By then, the gunfire had ended and the shouting had begun.

"Face down!"

"Don't move!"

Then a third grating voice sent a chill up Rex's spine:

“You’re no use to me if you can’t quiet their whimpering and caterwauling. Put a stop to it, or I’ll put a stop to *you*.”

Four more shots in quick succession. That’s all it took to bring about a complete and eerie silence.

Rex ran into the cobblestone alleyway that separated The Gentleman’s Emporium from the Charles Street Savings and Loan. Three gunmen, eyes blazing through the narrow slit between grimy bandannas and low-slung hats, burst through the double doors and jumped onto their horses. As they hurtled north, a fourth man flung two of the bank’s canvas money bags across his saddle horn, then aimed his revolver at Rex’s forehead.

Shouldn’t have skipped services on Sunday, he thought as the malevolent glare bored into his eyes. The quiet *snick* of the releasing hammer sent tremors of gratitude through him. The outlaw climbed onto his mount, and in less than a minute, caught up to the others. Rex guessed why he was still alive: in the melee, the robber had likely lost count of how many times he’d pulled the trigger and hadn’t wanted to waste a bullet.

Sure enough, the outlaw aimed the six-shooter again—at his partners this time—and the men hit the ground like sacks of grain.

Head bowed, Rex whispered a heartfelt prayer of thanks that he hadn’t ended up the same way. When he opened his eyes, the robber tipped his hat and galloped past the lifeless bodies, those fat moneybags bouncing against his horse’s withers as he disappeared around a bend in the road.

Rex entered the bank, followed by two Baltimore constables.

The first knelt beside a woman in blue calico. “It’s the teller, Miss Williams.” Frowning, he exhaled a ragged sigh. “Dead.”

“So’s the manager,” his partner said, using his baton as a pointer. “Don’t know about that fella.”

That fella, Rex realized, was his pa. He took a knee and leaned close, hoping to feel a breath or hear a whisper of proof that his father had survived, despite the growing pool of blood beneath him.

So much blood.

“Son...”

“Don’t talk,” Rex said, and started to rise. “I’ll fetch the doc.”

But his father grabbed his hand. “Ought not have waited...” Eyes squeezed tightly shut, he cringed, then continued through clenched teeth “You...you need to know...”

“Hush now, you hear?”

“Your ma...Mavis...you need to know...”

The only thing Rex knew was that his father was dying. He’d helped butcher pigs and cows on the farm, yet this was more blood than he’d ever seen.

“Son?”

“I’m here, Pa, right here.”

“Forgive me?”

Forgive Pa? It should be *him* asking forgiveness, not the other way around! If he hadn’t needed new clothes, his pa wouldn’t have gone into the bank to withdraw what little money he’d saved.

Rex’s hesitation agitated his father, and he raised up on one elbow. “Need to hear you say it, boy, *please?*”

He’d do anything to ease his pa’s pain, and though he had no idea why, Rex said, “All right, I forgive you.”

Calmer now, his pa lay back and gave a single nod as his big hand went limp.

Rex’s heart was racing. What would he do without this good man in his life, this man who was as much friend as father, who’d taught him just about everything he knew?

The first cop bent at the waist. “Is he gone, boy?”

Rex nodded, unable to speak past the aching sob that blocked his throat.

Straightening, the cop told his partner, “I heard that Verdell Lundgren and his gang were in the area, but never in all my days did I believe they’d be bold enough to hit Baltimore.”

“Yeah, well, we need to get the mortician down here,” the man said, wincing at the bodies, the bloody boot prints that led to the door,

and a single silver dollar glinting on the threshold, like the medallion that hung from a matching chain around the killer's neck.

The first cop shook his head. "Sorry for your loss, son." He lifted his chin a notch to add, "You can help us catch your pa's killers if you tell us everything you remember about them."

In the blink of an eye, Rex relived that moment in the street.

"The one in charge had dark eyes. It's all I saw. They wore bandannas up high and their hats down low."

The officer's pencil scritch-scratched across his little tablet. "What about their boots? Horses? Saddles?"

"He had a hoarse voice, deeper than any I ever heard. Same voice that gave the order to silence the whimpering of..."

Rex stood, slapped a palm to the back of his neck. "He rode a red roan mare. Never saw boots like that...grey and white snakeskin. White Stetson with a black band. And a medal of some sort around his neck."

"Very observant," the copper said, looking up from his notes. "We're shorthanded at the department." He sent Rex a halfhearted smile. "You should look into signing on."

The comment put him back a step. "Seems a peculiar thing to say, what with my pa not even cold yet."

The officer's face went red. "My apologies."

"I need to take him home. We have a lot to do."

"We?"

Aunt Mavis. His brain reeled with disjointed thoughts. He'd need every minute of the long ride home to figure out how to break the news to the aunt who'd raised him from infancy. Then, there'd be a grave to dig and a headstone to carve. Under the circumstances, maybe that tightwad McGraw would extend the loan payment, especially once he secured the hotel job. Abigail had sworn him to secrecy: no one else had applied for the job.

But what about Mavis? She'd never agree to move into town, and he couldn't leave her all the way out there, alone on the farm, with no one to help with the chores and no protection.

“Go on, son,” the officer said, his voice soft and low. “Take your pa home.”

Rex nodded. “I’ll be back for him, just as soon as I turn the wagon ’round.”

He wanted to get his father cleaned up, so Mavis wouldn’t have to see him this way. Maybe the undertaker would take pity on him and help. Rex wanted to do things right, the way his pa would have.

Forgive me....

Rex shook his head, hoping to dislodge the troubling words from his brain.

“Don’t do anything stupid, son,” the cop said.

“Huh?”

“I been readin’ faces for nigh on to two decades now, and what yours is tellin’ me will only land you in the graveyard. If it turns out the Lundgren Gang *was* behind this....” He put his tablet and pencil away. “Let’s just say I can tell you’re not a cold-blooded killer. But Lundgren? He doesn’t have a heart or a soul. Wouldn’t think twice about putting a bullet between your eyes.”

The man had almost done exactly that, just moments ago.

“Your pa wouldn’t want you to end up that way.”

“How can you tell all that, just by looking?”

“Like I said, been doin’ this a long time.”

An idea began to form in Rex’s mind.

If he joined the police force, and learned the things this officer already knew, he could put the knowledge to use...

...hunting down the animal who had killed his pa.