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BRIDES OF LAURENT

A
WARRIOR'S
HEART



MISTY M. BELLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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*To my mother.
My first reader, proofreader, endless babysitter,
and primary moral support.
I couldn't do this book thing without you!*



The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.

Psalm 18:2



SEPTEMBER 1814

ROCKY MOUNTAINS, RUPERT'S LAND (CANADA)

Another ten paces and she'd have to shoot.

Brielle Durand steadied the arrow fletching against her cheek, then pushed her body farther into the bow to draw the cord tighter.

The man in her sights rode calmly forward, his breath blowing white in the early morning air. The mount beneath him snorted, releasing its own cloud as it bobbed against the bit. The animal must sense the nearing danger.

In truth, the beast had more intelligence than its rider. As was usual in the ways of animals. Especially when compared to an Englishman like this fellow appeared to be.

Five more strides.

She narrowed her gaze, focusing on the point of aim so her arrow would hit his midsection. Should she give him warning? Perhaps the cry of a mountain lion would plant fear in his chest. She caught her breath, preparing to make the fierce scream she'd practiced so oft.

But the man spurred his horse faster, as though eager to

charge through the opening in the rock. Surely he couldn't see the sheltered courtyard just beyond. The place forbidden to outsiders—especially Englishmen.

She locked her jaw to steady herself. Since her eighteenth birthday, when she'd finally been allowed to fight with the warriors, she swore an oath each morning to protect their village. Never again would an Englishman enter their inner circle unhindered. Her people had learned the terrible lesson well the last time. Memory of her mother's lifeless eyes tried to surface, but she pushed the distraction away.

Pressing against the bow, she took a final breath to aim, then let the arrow fly. *Guide its path, Lord.*

A roar broke the morning quiet, radiating from the rocky cliffs like the bellow of a wounded bear. The man doubled over, wrapping his arms around his middle. The long slender shaft of her arrow extended from the leathers that clothed him.

She inhaled a steadying breath, then released it. She'd done what she must to protect her people. Now came the time to uncover his reason for approaching the circle. Her home.

The safety of her people.



Evan MacManus gripped the arrow shaft with both hands, forcing his body to draw in air despite the agony in his gut.

He'd not even heard the Indians' approach. Not noticed any quieting of the forest creatures. He must be losing his instincts, and this arrow served as grave proof of that fact.

He reined Granite into a cluster of trees, where the trunks might shield him from another arrow. Precious little time remained to extract the point before the Indians would be upon

him. His hammering pulse only made each breath harder to inhale. He had to push aside the pain and focus on what must be done.

Feeling for the solid thickness of the arrowhead to make sure the iron hadn't sunk completely beneath his skin, he clenched his jaw at the cramping in his gut. Best to get this over with.

The arrow pulled loose from his flesh in a clean motion—maybe it hadn't sunk deep enough to damage any organs. The tip snagged on his buckskin tunic, and he wiggled it loose but stopped himself before hurling the wicked thing into the woods. With a hand pressing his undershirt against the wound to staunch the bleeding, he tucked the arrow in his musket scabbard and peered around the trunk of the tree nearest him. He could investigate which tribe had made the weapon later. If he survived this attack. At the moment, he had to find a way to ensure he didn't get a more personal introduction to whoever shot him.

No movement flashed in the morning light beyond the trees. Only a cluster of scraggly bushes marked the other side of the trail. But the warrior had likely been shooting from farther ahead, maybe even from the bend in the path, where the bases of two mountains met to form a narrow opening between them. The gap created a natural gateway where an enemy could find cover and wait.

A spasm seized Evan, doubling him over as he fought to stifle a groan. He had to keep breathing, or this lightness in his head would take over.

"To the ground. Now," barked a voice behind him. The tone held an accent, but not any Indian tongue he'd ever heard.

Evan twisted, biting back a grunt as he tried to focus his

wavering vision on the figure standing not five strides behind his horse, bow and arrow at the ready. He had no doubt that second arrow would find its way into his flesh if he didn't obey the order.

Pressing a hand tight against his wound, he clutched his saddle horn with the other and eased himself to the ground. He didn't release his hold on either the saddle or his gut as he tried to settle the spinning in his head. Had he lost so much blood already? The warm liquid coated his hand, which meant he wasn't staunching the flow. Yet he shouldn't be this lightheaded so quickly.

Ignoring the thought, he squinted at the bundle of furs before him.

"To the ground, I said. Or it's another arrow you'll meet."

That was no Indian's speech. Certainly not broken English, but the words contained a lilt only a Frenchman could master.

Blast. How had he stumbled upon the enemy all the way out here? He'd hoped—prayed—this territory was too far west for him to meet one of the Canadians they were fighting.

"Who are you?" He knew better than to argue with a man pointing a weapon, but the cramping in his gut made his thoughts swim in a disjointed flow.

A growl emanated from his adversary. Guttural, but not so deep as he would have expected. Still, the tone made it clear the fellow's patience was fast waning.

Evan released the saddle horn, lowered his arm, and sank to his knees on the frozen ground. Snow hadn't yet fallen in this part of the territory, but if the cold stinging his exposed skin was any indicator, an icy torrent would be upon them soon.

The Indian—or whoever was cloaked in the animal skins—circled around him, never dropping the aim of his arrow. The faint crackle of leaves bespoke an approach from behind. Would the man bind his wrists or pierce him with a knife and end his life?

Evan would have to turn and topple the stranger if he were to have any chance of getting the upper hand. He could do it, even with the arrow wound, certainly. He'd fought tougher opponents in battle after having received more than one slice from a saber. A Frenchman would be an easy match—if only he could keep his swirling wits about him.

Footsteps padded behind him, and Evan tensed to spin and strike.

“Lower your—”

He whirled and shot his fist forward, praying his aim would be true, even though his target blurred into three shapes. His arm struck something—fur?—and the man issued a high-pitched gasp. Was this a boy?

But Evan had no time to ponder as something grabbed his wrist and a force slammed into his back, shoving him down, almost to the ground.

He writhed, jerking his arm to get away from the man's grasp. Evan brought his free hand around to strike a blow. The effort sent a knife of pain through his gut, but he clamped his jaw tight and fought harder.

His opponent moved too quickly, out of striking distance before Evan could land a blow. His dizziness must be slowing his movements, but he had to overcome that. The man had Evan's arm pinned behind him now, and a boot in his back, pressing him toward the dirt.

He resisted the pressure, his stomach hovering about a foot

above the forest floor. But the effort stole his strength more every second. He'd have enough energy left for one more counterattack, and this time he had to overcome his enemy or he'd never complete his mission. He'd already spotted signs that he might have reached his goal.

This mountain he'd been riding around possessed the orange striations usually found near pitchblende. Now, he had to locate that mineral itself so the army's scientists could create the blast that would finally end this brutal war. This work was all he had left, and he'd carry out his assignment no matter what it took.

Somehow, he had to make restitution for last time.

With a mighty effort, he twisted around, reaching for the ankle that held him low. The attacker must have been prepared for his movement and grabbed Evan's free wrist, jerking his hand upward so his arms burned at the joint of his shoulders—effectively stealing the last of his strength and gaining the upper hand. Literally.

Were these his final moments? They couldn't be. *God, help me.*

Evan knelt there, struggling for breath. Even when he sucked in air, the wind didn't seem to satisfy the craving in his chest. Perhaps the arrow had punctured his breathing vessel.

His captor worked quickly with his wrists, wrapping a rough cord around them. Despite the unsteadiness in his head, Evan strained to look around, to keep his ears aware of any sound that might give notice of more enemies approaching. Perhaps help, even, as unlikely as that was. But one could hope.

No unnatural noises greeted him. Only a pheasant's call broke the cold silence.

At last, the man behind him gave a final jerk on the binding, then released Evan's hands. The immediate relief in his upper arms seemed to sap a little more of his strength as his body sagged.

"You will walk." The man's voice had such an unusual accent, making it hard to place either his age or nationality. Definitely young, though.

How humbling. Here he was, Evan MacManus, former captain in the American army and now a trusted spy commissioned by President Madison himself, brought down by a lad with a bow and arrow.

Evan struggled to his feet, spreading them wide to keep from toppling over as his vision swam. Even with his eyes squeezed tight, his body wobbled more than he could control. He shouldn't be this affected by a simple wound, even with the blood loss. Had the arrowhead been tainted? He'd heard tales of Indians dipping the tips in poison before battle.

A hand gripped his arm, giving him something to brace against—until it yanked him forward. Still, the hold kept him upright as he forced one foot in front of the other. The grip felt small, even through the layers of his coat.

Evan forced his eyes open, but the sunlight made the dizziness more intense. He tried squinting, which helped. He had to stay alert, watch his surroundings if he was going to get out of this alive. So far, they appeared to be walking the same path north he'd been riding. Toward the opening between the mountains.

When they reached the spot, his captor loosed a piercing whistle. Evan fought to keep from cringing at the surprise blast so near his ear, but a fresh blade of pain pierced his

middle anyway. When a second shrill whistle came, he almost jabbed the lad with his elbow.

But the reply that sounded from the other side of the rock grabbed his focus. They wove around a boulder to proceed through the opening, and Evan squinted again now that he could see bright daylight on the other side.

The place looked to be a meadow of sorts. With figures darting through the winter brown grass. Voices called, or maybe laughed. Children's voices? The pain and blood loss must be making him daft. Or maybe he was being taken to an Indian village. He had to stay awake and watch for a chance to escape.

His captor pushed him forward as other figures approached. These, too, were wrapped in animal skins, but their bulk proved them to be full-grown men. His vision blurred further, even when he tried to focus. He couldn't make out much more than dark or light hair.

Low murmurings sounded around him, yet they seemed to come from so far away. Or maybe it was he who had moved. He had to recover his strength. Squinting again, he tried to straighten. "Who are you?"

The talking around him ceased, and a figure stepped in front of him. He blinked to focus, and the fur cloaking the person began to look familiar. His captor.

The man reached up and pushed the hood off his head, revealing dark hair and a smooth face.

Evan blinked. He must be dafter than he realized, although with the person less than a stride away, it was hard to miss what his eyes took in.

A woman?

Even through his shadowy vision, he could make out the delicate angles of her face. Those piercing dark eyes.

“You have come to Laurent. Now you will tell us why.” The lilt in her voice sounded different now that he could see her. With her tone so melodic, how could he not have recognized her as female?

A fresh wave of dizziness washed over him, and he braced his feet. A hand gripped his arm, that same small hand as before.

“Your purpose, monsieur. Before you swoon, if you please.”

Even if he wanted to tell her, his mouth had turned to cotton. Blackness circled the edge of his vision, increasing until he could only see her blurry form through a small hole, like he was looking through a field glass. This lightness in his head almost took over completely. His body sank like it weighed twice as much as usual.

Lord, don't let them kill me. Not yet.

He had too much to make up for. Too much left to fix before he faced the final judgment.