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BRIDES OF LAURENT

A
HEALER'S
PROMISE

MISTY M. BELLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Beller, Misty M., author.

Title: A healer's promise / Misty M. Beller.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of
Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: Brides of Laurent ; [2]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021053582 | ISBN 9780764238055 (paperback) |

ISBN 9780764240126 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493437290 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.E45755 H43 2022 | DDC 813/.6--dc23/eng/20211029

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021053582>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christenson

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To my dear friend and amazing author Lacy Williams.
This book wouldn't have been finished without
your unending encouragement and accountability.
You are such a blessing to me,
and I'm thankful God brought us together!*



A merry heart doeth good like a medicine:
but a broken spirit drieth the bones.

Proverbs 17:22

1

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with symmetrical, swirling scrollwork on both sides, ending in a small diamond-shaped ornament at the bottom center.

FEBRUARY 1815

ROCKY MOUNTAINS, RUPERT'S LAND (CANADA)

The sound of animal hooves shattered the quiet morn, and a flock of chickadees shot from the trees near Audrey Moreau. Recoiling, she slipped behind a brushy cedar. That noise reverberated much too loudly to be an elk or caribou, even a whole herd of them. Her breath puffed in icy clouds as she peeked through the snow-covered green needles, her heart thumping in her ears.

Down the creek a distance from her hiding place, a man sat atop a horse, letting the animal drink from the rushing stream. Her chest seized for a half second until recognition settled in.

Evan MacManus. Her friend Brielle's betrothed had returned already. Brielle had been watching for him for days, but Audrey hadn't really expected his arrival for another few weeks at least. His trip must have gone smoothly. And his desire to see Brielle had likely driven him to travel faster than he might have otherwise.

Audrey stepped from behind the tree and raised her hand

to call out to him, but as her mouth parted, another figure caught her notice—this one much closer and tucked in the shadow of the woods. He, too, sat atop a horse.

Beneath the brow of his hat, his gaze locked on her.

Audrey's breathing stilled as her entire body tensed. Who was this stranger? Their village was hidden deep in the mountains, unknown to anyone except the local Dinee natives. And Evan. And perhaps Evan's superiors, whom he'd gone back to report to about the mineral he'd found in their caves.

This man must have been sent to accompany Evan. Maybe he was the first of the miners and scientists who would come to harvest the pitchblende to help America win the war against Britain.

She raised a tentative hand in greeting, though her heart thundered with awareness that she'd walked out here alone, with nothing for protection save a small knife to harvest barks for her medicines. That single blade would be little help against a man like this one. She'd been raised to believe all strangers intended to cause harm, like the ten Englishmen who'd invaded their village a decade before, killing and wounding a host of innocents before they, too, were killed.

But if this man was Evan's friend, he must be safe. Right?

He didn't return her smile, nor raise his own hand in greeting. He did nod, but something about the way he was tucked just inside the edge of the trees made it appear he was trying to keep himself separate. Maybe even hiding from Evan.

She glanced downriver to where Evan watered his horse, but he'd gone.

Icy dread crept through her, but she did her best not to

panic. She had to find out who this stranger was. If he didn't go with Evan, why would he be here? How had a stranger come to this remote area?

She forced her posture to relax and curved her mouth into as close to a welcoming smile as she could manage. "Hello." She used English, as it seemed most likely he was from the American states.

The man studied her for a heartbeat. Then his gaze flicked toward where Evan's horse had stood, then refocused on her, all within the space of a single breath.

He nodded once more. "Hello." His voice held a different cadence than Evan's. He didn't seem to intend to say more. Did he think she ran into strangers on horseback every day in these woods?

She lifted her chin. "I am Audrey Moreau. You are?"

His response came quicker this time. "Levi. Levi Masters." That unique cadence was even stronger, more stilted than Evan's speech. But then, Evan had grown up in Scotland, so maybe that accounted for the difference.

She offered another welcoming smile. "And from where do you hail, Levi Masters? Are you traveling with Evan?"

His expression didn't shift, and he didn't flick his gaze again to the place Evan had been, but something in his eyes seemed to distance himself before he responded. "I've been traveling with Evan from America. It appears he's about to leave me behind, though. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Moreau. Perhaps we'll meet again soon."

As he nudged his horse forward into the clearing along the stream and turned the direction Evan had gone, a frisson of worry slid through her. He probably *was* traveling with Evan. What reason would he have for lying about that? But

it was that slight shift in his eyes that raised the head of caution inside her.

Brielle reminded her so often to be careful not to overlook a person's ill intentions just because she sought to see the good inside them. There were enough odd details in Levi's actions to give Audrey pause.

Maybe this stranger simply wasn't comfortable around people. She well understood that condition, as her father also struggled with the pressures other people's expectations placed on him and how he thought others expected him to act in public. Perhaps this man simply felt ill at ease meeting a new person.

Yet, the safety of her people might be at stake. Levi Masters rode directly toward Laurent's gate, the direction Evan had gone. She should catch up with him, surpass him even, and sound the alarm before he entered the village. Her people had created a signal for this very occasion—when an outsider who may be dangerous approached the gate.

She started forward, quickening her step to catch up with the lanky stride of his horse. When he glanced back at her, she slowed. If his intentions were nefarious, would he change his plan if he thought she was following him?

She was no good at stealth, that was for certain.

She kept her gait as normal as possible, even though she dropped farther behind the man. If she ducked into the woods where she wouldn't be seen and tried to run around ahead of him, he would suspect her motives. At least this way, she could call out to the village before he entered.

Lord, let them be listening for me. With the joy surrounding Evan's arrival, the guard stationed by the wall might not have his ear attuned to a signal.



Heavy clouds gathered on the horizon, threatening more snow. Along with the frigid wind against his back, Levi Masters could sense the woman trailing behind him, though he didn't let himself glance at her again. Perhaps he'd made the wrong move in saying he'd been traveling with MacManus. When she'd asked the question, it seemed like the perfect cover to allay her suspicions about his presence in the woods.

Technically, he *had* been traveling with the man, though MacManus hadn't known it.

Had the beauty by the stream suspected his duplicity? Part of him almost wished she'd seen through him. Then he could finally be honest and forthright.

His gaze sought out the tracks in the snow ahead to ensure he was still following MacManus's trail. The habit had become second nature these long weeks that he'd followed the man from Washington. He'd perfected his ability to stay far enough behind that MacManus didn't hear him, but close enough not to lose the trail. When they reached the snow-covered ground of these northern mountains, his job had become easier. Though, at times, more treacherous as the horses maneuvered over the icy stone.

A shrill whistle from behind him pierced the air, filling the open space around him so its source was almost hard to detect.

But he knew.

The woman trailing him must have signaled someone ahead of his presence. Did she intend to warn Evan MacManus? Or the people of her village?

He scanned the landscape before him, but all he could see

was the cliffside of a mountain, with shrubby brush clustered in sections around its base. Were the caves the people lived in somewhere in that mountain? He'd overheard enough of MacManus's report to his superiors to know of the caves and the mineral he'd found within them.

A mineral the US government thought would give them power to win any war.

Those words had resonated so strongly within Levi that he knew he had to follow MacManus and learn more of this situation. Other information he'd overheard in the past from this particular American spy had proven quite valuable. Though this American war might be behind them, who knew when another battle would arise? This intelligence might finally give Britain the upper hand they needed. British Parliament needed to know what the Americans were plotting now.

A shift at the base of the mountain ahead drew his focus. Beside a cluster of skinny-needed trees, he thought he spotted a slight movement.

His imagination? Maybe, but he tightened his grip on the rifle resting across his lap. MacManus had traveled that exact direction, which couldn't be a coincidence. This must be the entrance to the cave village.

He would have preferred to sneak around the edge of the woods to see what he was up against before making his presence known, but Miss Audrey Moreau had taken that advantage away from him with her alert.

Tingles ran across his shoulders and down his back. How many sets of eyes watched him?

Lord, what should I do? Station your angels around me for protection and give me wisdom about how to speak to these people.

When he'd neared ten strides from the place where he'd seen the movement, what he'd thought was the mountainside separated at the top to reveal a V of sunlight. The sight made no sense but must be part of their entrance.

Sitting deeper in his saddle, he eased back on Chaucer's reins to slow the gelding. Any moment, he would likely be stopped at gunpoint. Or worse.

A man stepped out from the stone and planted himself, legs spread, arrow drawn tight in his bow and aimed at Levi. He barked a sharp command. "Halt."

Levi halted Chaucer as he studied the fellow. He wore furs, as anyone who lived in this frozen land would, though his light brown hair proclaimed him to be of European descent. Not one of the natives. And his accent . . . he spoke the word with a lilt, maybe French or Italian.

"Who are you?" The fellow still held his bow lifted and drawn, ready to let the arrow fly at any moment. They must not have muskets here if they still used bow and arrow.

At least Levi had that advantage. "I've come from the south looking for a village of caves. Is Evan MacManus here among you?" Maybe giving the man's name would allow him entrance, or at least keep that arrow from flying yet.

Once he got inside, though, he had no idea what he would say to MacManus. The American hated him. He'd worry about that when the time came. Working in the intelligence division had given him plenty of practice at coming up with creative stories to keep his neck from the noose. Yet most of those stories were lies.

The man's chin shifted, as though he was listening to someone behind him speak. Then he refocused on Levi and lowered his bow, though he still kept the arrow tight against

the bowstring. “You may enter the courtyard.” The fellow stepped to the side and motioned with the arrow for Levi to ride forward.

Did he dare? Approaching whatever opening was hidden in that stone would be riding into a nest of vipers. But did he really have a choice? If he spun Chaucer and made a run for safety, this man would likely plant that arrow in his back. And Levi, if he survived, would have lost his best chance to see the village and find out more about the mineral—the secret tool that would win any future war for America as MacManus had claimed.

He had to take this chance. He was a Masters, after all, practically bred to sacrifice his life for Britain. His grandfather and uncle had died for the motherland, and most days his father wished he’d paid that ultimate sacrifice instead of being left without the use of his legs.

Levi nudged his mount forward. He would do what he must to serve his people, though he might be riding to his death. If that happened, perhaps his father would finally be proud of his efforts for their country.