

A woman in a green dress and fur collar stands in a snowy mountain landscape, holding a snowshoe. The scene is framed by a large rock overhang on the left. The background shows snow-covered mountains and trees under a bright sky with lens flare.

3
BRIDES OF LAURENT

A
DAUGHTER'S
COURAGE

MISTY M. BELLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



A
DAUGHTER'S
COURAGE

MISTY M. BELLER



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2022 by Misty M. Beller

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Beller, Misty M., author.

Title: A daughter's courage / Misty M. Beller.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022. | Series: Brides of Laurent ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2022015493 | ISBN 9780764238062 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764240782 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493439003 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3602.E45755 F35 2022 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022015493>

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

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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 mastermind group:
Christy, Erin, Laura, and Robin.
You ladies have meant the world to me.
Thank you for your support, your wisdom, your prayers,
and your unconditional love.*



And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

1

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

SEPTEMBER 1817

ROCKY MOUNTAINS, RUPERT'S LAND (CANADA)

Cooking fulfilled Charlotte Durand like little else did.

Maybe not the act of slicing meat and stirring stew over a hot fire, but the steps required to ensure each morsel she prepared would bring her family pleasure. That her food would nourish and strengthen. And, in this case, furnish the setting for a celebration.

The trading party had returned from Fort Versailles.

Laurent's council had finally opened their solitary village to a small bit of trade with the fort located two days' ride to the east, but only a couple men went at a time. For this journey, Erik and Monsieur Rochette had been gone five days, returning this afternoon with heaping packs of supplies.

Tonight, their table would be overflowing just like the traders' packs, and she had so many final preparations to finish. In less than an hour, both men would sup at the Durand table to share news. Who knew what fascinating tidings they'd bring this time? So many people passed in and out of

the fort's log walls. . . . Charlotte couldn't imagine meeting so many strangers every day.

The rear door of their apartment opened, and her father stepped in, brushing something from his hands. Probably rock dust, if he'd been visiting the new homes being cut into the mountainside. "Smells wonderful in here."

She smiled at him. She was no great chef, not like her good friend Audrey Masters and some of the older women in the village. Her skill had been completely self-taught through testing and watching others and tweaking her own methods based on the results. That had always made her outcome a little different from the rest. But she loved working in the background to make things happen as they should and to keep their home running seamlessly.

And this meal had to be perfect.

Papa had asked her to prepare *ragoût d'ours*, and thankfully the fatty bear meat was almost impossible to scorch.

Papa approached the fire where she stirred the ragoût and inhaled deeply. "Ah, wonderful. Hugo will be pleased."

She stiffened and glanced at him. "Hugo Lemaire? I thought Erik and Monsieur Rochette were dining with us."

The chagrin on her father's face tugged her middle into a knot. "I invited Hugo also. He was interested in hearing news from the fort, and he'll be trading some of the supplies when our Dinee friends come in a few days." Papa's eyes turned hopeful. "He really is such a good man, Charlotte. And he thinks highly of you."

The knot tightened into a thick coil. Papa had taken the young man under his wing. At first, she'd thought her father's efforts were simply for Hugo's benefit, to help him return to a better path after the mistakes he made in his

youth—especially the debacle with Gerald that nearly took her sister’s life.

But Papa had clearly seen something he liked in the fellow, and the more time they spent together, the more her father spoke his praises specifically to *her* when Hugo wasn’t around. She’d finally come to terms with the truth: Her father thought Hugo should be her match. Hugo had made his interest clear, too, even in his shy way.

Could he really think she was interested in the man? Had he not seen the times she’d gone out of her way to avoid Hugo’s presence or turned the conversation when Papa droned on about the fellow’s growing list of good qualities? Hugo had come far in the past few years, exchanging his slothful ways for a trade where he worked hard. He’d even stopped mumbling, as he’d once been known for, though now his shyness kept him even quieter than before.

Still, he wasn’t the man for her. Every part of her cringed at the thought.

The look on Papa’s face now was almost sappy, as though he was caught up in the possibility of budding amour. He resembled more a meddling mother than the wise chief of Laurent she’d always considered him.

She had to stop this. If she didn’t speak plainly now, he would keep on with this matchmaking until he went too far. Once he knew exactly how she felt about the man, Papa would leave it alone. Surely. He cared about his children’s happiness. He’d always been the best of fathers.

Rising so she could face him, she steeled herself to speak the hard words. She hated confrontation, but getting this over with would stop the situation from growing worse. She never raised a stir if she could help it. Hopefully all those

times she'd passively given in to his requests would help him do the same for her now.

Her father lifted his brows, waiting for her to speak. Probably expecting a simple request, like for him to bring an extra pot of water or to borrow Audrey's larger stewpot.

She let out a breath. "Papa. I need to talk with you about Hugo."

His brows rose even higher, and a hint of a hopeful smile played at his mouth. "Yes?"

She steeled her nerves and started in. "You've made it clear you like him and feel he would be a good match for me. I've not been straightforward with my feelings on the matter, but it's time I do so. I'm glad Hugo has come so far under your tutelage. I'm glad he's become a respectable citizen now." *Instead of the lazy vagabond he was only a few years ago.* "But I don't want to marry him. I feel no attraction toward him. No deeper sentiment."

None of the fiery sparks that lit between her sister Brielle and her husband, even two years after their marriage. Watching the pair together had shown Charlotte a passion she wanted for herself. If she were ever to marry, she wanted that depth of connection with her husband.

And Hugo Lemaire inspired no such reaction.

"Charlotte, *mon chou*." Papa's voice took on that coddling tone he'd used back when she was a girl and he urged her to eat one of Brielle's scorched attempts at biscuits. "You've grown up alongside Hugo, so I understand how you might think of him as only a friend, not a potential husband. But I think if you work to adjust your thinking, you'll find him the perfect match for your personality. He's quiet and thoughtful, just like you. He's become such a hard worker,

taking pride in everything he does. The two of you would have a pleasant, productive home.”

Pleasant. Productive. Not her primary goals in a marriage.

She squeezed her eyes shut as she scrambled to find the words to show him just how impossible it would be for her to find happiness with Hugo.

But before she could manage them, a knock sounded on the front door. Papa clapped a hand on her shoulder. “Our guests have arrived. And please, Charlotte, give Hugo a chance. I really think he would make a good match.”

She couldn’t speak past the roiling in her belly as her father stepped around her to answer the door. She turned back to the stewpot hanging over the fire, sinking to her knees on the stone floor as the strength in her legs gave way.

Her father wouldn’t force her to marry Hugo, would he? He had the right. Often marriages in Laurent were planned by the parents. But the potential bride and groom were usually allowed a voice in the process.

Yet even if Papa finally let go of this ridiculous notion that she should marry Hugo, what other man lived in Laurent whom she could possibly love? Their little village had been separated from the rest of the world for so many years—more than a century. Brielle’s and Audrey’s husbands were the only two strangers who’d joined their numbers during that entire time, and that had only happened in the last two years.

“Charlotte, whatever you’re cooking smells good enough to bring a weary traveler home.”

She turned to smile at Erik, one of her father’s good friends and a leading member of the council. “You returned a day sooner than we expected. I’d like to think it’s my ragoût,

but I suspect your haste has more to do with your sweet wife.” Erik was nearly her father’s age, so he didn’t often go on the trading journeys to the fort. There must have been a particular reason he’d left Madeline and their warm home just as winter’s chill had begun to set in.

He sent her a wink. “You know me well.”

Erik turned to speak with her father, and Charlotte slipped into the background, placing bread and dried fruit on the table, then filling bowls with the stew and mugs with tea. With so much to do, she managed to avoid catching Hugo’s eye, though she could feel the weight of his gaze at times.

When everything was ready, she nodded to Papa.

He sent her a smile of thanks, then motioned to the neatly spread table. “Please, my friends. Be seated and fill your hungry bellies before we hear the news from the fort.”

She stayed by the fire, perched on a stool to scrub the utensils she’d used in cooking. But mostly she listened to the sounds of pleasure as the men ate. At last, as she polished the grooves in the fir trees Papa had engraved on her cooking spoons, he sat back in his chair. “Now that we’re warmed from that wonderful meal, what news have you learned?”

Erik wiped his mouth on the cloth and placed it on the table. “Not much seems to have changed since Thayer and Gaume went in the spring. Most of the trappers have already set out for the winter season, but a few stayed behind to work on the fort. I heard there were some skilled artisans in the group—metalworkers and carpenters, mostly—but we didn’t get to meet them. The North West company is sending an assistant for the factor, and it’s said he’ll be bringing his wife with him.”

Charlotte paused in her cleaning. A white woman? Dinee

bands that included women and children sometimes camped outside the fort for trading, but this was the first time she'd heard of a white woman coming to the area. Would she be from the Canadas or the United States?

As much as she wanted to ask these questions now, this conversation was Papa's to lead. She could ask him or Erik for more details later. Besides, the last thing she wanted was to draw Hugo's attention—more than he already looked at her, anyway. Had Papa told him she would be interested if he made an effort for them to spend time together?

A twinge niggled in her chest. She didn't want to hurt Hugo. He really seemed to have changed from who he had been as a lad.

But there was no way she could marry him. She'd rather die as the favorite spinster auntie to Brielle's children, whenever they came, and even to those her younger brother Andre would produce when he grew of age to find his own bride.

That would be far better than sacrificing her life to a man she didn't love.



Damien Levette's mule rocked back on its haunches as they plunged down the slope. Gulliver had done this so many times the past few months that the mount no longer balked at going straight down an incline. If he weren't so surefooted, Damien would never ask the mule to charge down a mountainside like this. He didn't mind risking his own life, but he had no desire to jeopardize his faithful friend—the only companion he had left.

But Gulliver seemed to enjoy the challenge as much as

Damien did. And the rush that came when Damien's body dropped before his middle could catch up, when the base of the mountain loomed far below, made him finally feel alive. For a few moments, at least.

Then the truth would catch up with him. He had no right to feel so vibrant. Not when Michelle, his other half, the twin who'd always brought out the best in him, lay buried under six feet of mud and a block of carved stone.

He slowed Gulliver partway down the slope, guiding him to the left so he could descend the rest of the incline at a safer angle. If something happened to him because of Damien's recklessness, well . . . he already couldn't live with himself.

For now, though, he had to keep pushing on. That's what Michelle would have wanted. One day at a time. One hour at a time. These next few weeks would be the worst as he passed the first anniversary of her death, but at least he'd come far enough into the mountain wilderness that his misery wouldn't affect anyone else.

Gulliver didn't seem to mind his ill humor. Just stayed by his side faithfully. Exactly like Michelle had done for all those years.

A glance up at the sky showed the dark clouds descending lower than they'd been earlier. A few snow flurries had fallen yesterday but not enough to stick to the ground. The first real snow looked ready to fall soon, though. That might make tracking easier, but he needed to set some beaver snares before the rivers iced over.

Now that he'd left the main trapping party, it was up to him to find the best locations. No seasoned trapper like Arsenault was there to glance around and say a particular region seemed promising. But he also didn't have anyone

telling him when he had to pull up his snares and move on. He would be making his own decisions, then living with the consequences.

A bark jerked his attention to the base of the mountain. A doglike animal trotted from rock to rock, sniffing, then it raised its snout in the air and loosed a short yip. Coyote. Not big enough to be a wolf, even a lean one. Though this animal certainly was skinny. Bones poked up at its hips and shoulders, and very little flesh covered its ribs. Did that mean there wasn't much game in this area? The meat-eaters should be at their healthiest this time of year, having scarfed down plenty to prepare for the winter.

As the slope began to level out, Damien aimed the mule toward a line of trees that signaled water. A small creek, probably, but it might lead to a larger river prime for trapping.

When he rode past the coyote, the animal eyed him but didn't leap away. Daring fellow. They had that in common.

The creek contained only a small stream of water, but he turned Gulliver to follow it downstream. The larger rivers and lakes were fed by many such trickles.

The farther they rode, the banks on either side of the water grew deeper until they were nearly cliffs, twice the height of a man. For the most part, the ground dropped straight down to the stream, except for a few places where the animals had trod shallower paths down to drink.

At last, the sound of a distant rustle rose above the gentle murmur of the creek. Through the growth of trees ahead, he caught a glimpse of water—a great deal of it, as large as a lake. Relief eased the tension in his shoulders.

He did know what he was doing. Arsenault's scant teaching had taken root.

When he reined in Gulliver at the edge of the trees surrounding the larger body of water, he finally saw the full extent of what lay before him. A lake, yes, though not as large as he'd first thought. On the opposite shore, the grass met the lapping waves in a muddy cluster of underbrush and reeds. A prime place to set traps for otter and muskrat.

In front of him, the bank dropped in a steep rocky cliff to finally meet the water's surface far below. He should simply ride around to the shallow part of the lake, the place where the trapping would be best. Yet the lure of the cliffs drew his focus there. He could at least take a few minutes to study the landscape.

Dismounting, he stepped closer to the edge, grasping a thick sapling as he leaned over to better see the layers of stone that made up the bank. Where the creek fed into the river, it created a small waterfall, dropping about two arm-lengths to meet the surface of the lake. That accounted for the rustling sound.

He'd heard many a story about caves tucked behind falls, but this scant bit of liquid couldn't hide much. The stone behind the falling water looked solid enough.

But to the left of the falls . . . What was that dark place in the rock? Merely an indentation shadowed by an overhang? It looked too deep for that.

Moving over so he could get a better view from a different angle, he peered at the spot. Now it looked even more like a cave. The opening was small, but probably large enough for him to crawl into.

Did he dare?

A rush of anticipation surged through him. Yes, if he could get to the spot, he wanted to see what lay within. Besides, with the snow coming, he would need shelter. Hopefully this nook would be deep enough to provide cover.

His gaze tracked a possible path along the cliff wall to reach the cave. There looked to be footholds he could manage. And they were deep enough that he could use them to climb back up.

Turning back to Gulliver, he dug through his pack to find one of the few candles he carried, along with his tinderbox to create a flame. The moon and his campfire usually gave enough light to see at night, but if the cave went very deep, he'd need something to illuminate the darkness.

Of course, it was probably only a shallow opening. Where the hole was positioned in the center of the cliff, only birds would have easy access. With his tinderbox and candle tucked in his waistband, he trekked along the bank to the place he'd identified to begin his descent.

Maybe he should have tied a rope around his middle and secured it to a tree before going down, but if he slipped from the cliff, he'd only hit water. He could swim as well as the next lad who'd grown up in the land of many lakes.

The rough ground scraped his belly as he dangled his feet over the ledge, feeling along the wall with his boots for the foothold he'd seen. There. From one perch to the next, he moved sideways and downward. When he descended far enough that there were no saplings left to hold, he clutched the edges of stone jutting from the cliff, his fingers aching. The leather soles of his shoes flexed enough that he could use his feet to help grip.

At last, he stretched the final distance to place his foot

on the floor of the cave. Before leaning much weight on it, he shifted his toes farther into the opening, searching for a rear wall. Nothing.

With one foot on the secure surface, he pulled the other into the cave opening, then worked his upper body down so he could kneel just inside the entrance. He finally took in a full breath as he reached for the candle and tinderbox. The murky darkness inside the cave gave no sign of how deep it went or what lay within.

After two tries with the flint and steel, he built enough spark in the tinder to light the candlewick. Snuffing out the tinder, he peered into the darkness as he extended the candle.

The light flickered off the cave sides, which were narrower than the span of his arms in either direction, but he still couldn't see how deep the opening went. He crawled forward, holding the candle in front of him.

He'd only gone a few strides in when a distant rumble sounded. As the noise grew louder, it seemed to shake the air, vibrating in his chest and stirring alarm through every part of him.

An earthquake? The roar of a bear?

He dropped low, tucking against the wall on his left, preparing for whatever threat came. This time, his recklessness might have finally taken him too far.