

SISTERS OF THE ROCKIES • 2

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**ROCKY  
MOUNTAIN  
PROMISE**  
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**MISTY M. BELLER**

*USA Today Bestselling Author*

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### SISTERS OF THE ROCKIES

*Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*

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SISTERS OF THE ROCKIES • 2

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN PROMISE



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To my sweet daughter Laney, my inspiration for Lorelei.  
I'm so proud of what a smart, fun, determined  
young lady you're becoming!

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;  
they toil not, neither do they spin:  
And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all  
his glory was not arrayed like one of these.  
Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field,  
which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the  
oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O  
ye of little faith?

Matthew 6:28b–30

# ONE



**SPRING 1838**

**GREEN RIVER VALLEY (FUTURE WYOMING)**

**A** knot of dread twisted Lorelei Collins's middle as she studied the dark hump in the prairie ahead. The mound wasn't the right color to be a rock. It could only be . . . a buffalo.

A very dead buffalo.

As much as she wanted to turn her mare, Annabelle, and gallop the other direction, she kept her horse pointed toward the motionless body. Drawn like an onlooker to a carriage accident.

Except she wasn't coming to gawk. She had to see if the animal still lived. See if she could do something to save it, or at least ease its misery in these final moments.

Annabelle pricked her ears and slowed as they neared the buffalo. But when the mare tried to halt, Lorelei nudged her forward. "I know, girl. I don't want to see it either. But we have to make certain."

The trampled grass around them told the story clearly.

A buffalo chase had occurred. Somehow the hunters must not have realized this animal had fallen. Or they planned to come back for it. Pursuers sometimes ran with the herd for miles, bringing down as many as they could. Her belly roiled at the thought, but she pushed the grotesque image from her mind. People had to eat, but she hated to think about the process of killing.

Her mission was to save—especially animals. She was the one who came along after the hunters and found the helpless, those not mortally wounded, or the innocent that had depended on those now lifeless.

She probably couldn't do anything here, except pray the hunters came back and put the meat to good use filling hungry bellies and using skins to keep cold bodies warm through the winter.

As she guided Annabelle around the form so she could see its head, keeping a half-dozen strides away, she could see the protruding stem of an arrow near the beast's heart. Two more just behind it had likely punctured a lung. There would be naught she could do to save this one, even if it did still breathe.

She reined her mare in and slipped to the ground, leaving her reins crossed over the horse's neck. "Whoa, girl." Annabelle would stay put until she returned or called for her.

Lorelei crept toward the lifeless form. These mammoth animals amazed her every time she drew near one. They possessed such massive heads, far larger than the cattle back in Virginia. And the hair . . . great curls so bushy and coarse. This must be a female, for she didn't have the thick neck and chest that bulls developed. Nor any horns.

She focused her attention on the animal's side, doing her

best to ignore the arrows and streams of blood dampening the hair. No rise and fall to show life.

Her own chest tightened. Why did God make a world where his creatures had to kill one another just to survive?

She moved to its shoulder and rested a hand there, stroking the matted curls. The body was still a little warm, which meant death hadn't come long before. The animal felt so solid under her palm, a beautiful creature. *Thank you for all you did while you lived.* Probably giving life to young and ensuring this great species carried on.

She glanced down the length of the cow's belly, toward her udder. The shadow beneath her leg hid a swollen teat. Panic pressed in Lorelei's chest. The buffalo nursed a calf? She straightened and lifted her gaze around the area. Had the little one been carried onward with the herd? Or worse yet, been trampled under hundreds of massive hooves?

As her eyes searched for a small, dark form hidden in the tall grass, she nearly skipped over the pale shape standing fifty strides away. Her mind struggled to decipher what her eyes took in. This couldn't be a buffalo calf. Buffalo always had dark hair—nearly black when they shed, or dirty brown when the sun faded the outer coat.

Yet the silhouette looked exactly like a buffalo calf, thicker through the neck than offspring of cattle.

And it was alive. The soft mournful bawl it released proved so.

This must be the poor orphan, which meant it wouldn't survive now without a mother. The thing trembled on spindly legs, and she guessed it couldn't be more than a week or so old. And was likely so confused about what was happening.

It released another bawl, and her chest ached.

She bent over the mother again, this time leaning toward the udder. If she got enough of the animal's scent on her, the babe might allow her to approach. He wasn't old enough to be overly fearful of strangers.

After standing, she kept herself low and her posture soft as she approached the little fellow. It *was* a fellow; one glance underneath made that easy to see.

When she came ten strides away, the calf backed up a step. She extended her hands out farther and gave a low *maah*, as close to the sound of a cow as she could manage.

The calf still kept a hesitant stance but didn't flee as she eased forward. Five steps to go, then four.

*Please, God, let me catch it.* The Lord had the power to do anything. *Let this be one of those miracles.*

When she was almost an arm's length away, she stopped walking and stretched her hand as far as she could reach. The little one must have smelled its mother's scent on her, for it reached out to touch her finger with its nose, then took a tentative step forward, nosing along to her palm with its wet muzzle. Her heart melted at the sweet touch.

She kept her other hand outstretched. She would only have one chance to grab the babe. Ever so slowly, she shifted her body forward and over so she could come around to the calf's side. He began licking her hand with his slimy tongue. Poor fellow must be hungry.

The animal stayed distracted long enough for her to place her hand over his back, securing him in place. He jerked at the unfamiliar touch, but she locked her arm behind him, just like she'd done so many times with the foals on their ranch. This calf was still small enough she could handle him easily as he fought.

But he didn't struggle long, and she crooned soft words as he settled into her hold. "That's right, fella. I know you're sad, but I'll take care of you. I'll make sure you have a chance to grow big and strong, with plenty of food and a safe place to roam. You'll miss your mama for a little while, but I'll make sure nothing bad happens to you."

And she would fulfill that promise. First, though, she had to find a way to get him up on her horse and back to the ranch.

# TWO



That must be the ranch.” Tanner Mason stared down from the mountain pass at the wide valley before them. Two structures had been built halfway across the open land, with several corrals attached to the one that appeared to be the barn. Beyond, a large herd of horses grazed peacefully.

“Pretty place to live.” Wallace Burke, his partner in this venture, sounded a bit too wistful.

Tanner cut a sideways look at him. Wally met his gaze with a twitch of his mouth that looked almost embarrassed. “Kinda makes a man think about settling down out here.”

A spurt of panic slipped through Tanner, but he worked for a casual grin. “You wouldn’t be happy tied down to a farm and chores.”

Wally turned back to the picturesque scene before them and breathed a long sigh. “You’re right.” Then he straightened and nudged his horse down the slope. “Let’s go meet these neighbors and see their setup so I can remind myself all the reasons I don’t want this.”

Tanner nudged Domino to follow his friend and worked

to loosen the tension Wally's words had created in his shoulders. They'd just spent two months building a small fort and trading post. This business they were establishing on the western frontier would only work if he had someone keeping steady travel back and forth to the East to replenish their supplies. The traveling itch Wally carried in his veins made him the perfect person, but if he ever chose to settle down, Tanner would have to find another partner.

They were already down one man in their business three-some. George had taken ill right before they left St. Louis, but he hoped to come with Wally's next supply delivery. Until then, Tanner would be on his own manning the fort and trade room.

He could do it, though. He *would* do it.

No matter how much this endeavor required of him, he would make the business a success. As they reached the flat prairie land of the valley, they nudged their horses into a lope. This stretch would be perfect for a horse race. Or just a long hard run to release the frustrations of life.

As they drew near the ranch buildings, they slowed the horses back to walk. The structure on the right must be the house, for it had a slightly lower roof and a longer overhang across the front. It faced the barn and corrals, where a group of people stood beside the rails. They all turned toward Tanner and Wally as they approached.

Three men, and one of them . . . an Indian. Though they'd met several Natives since coming west to build the trading post, the sight of them still jarred him a little, as it probably did most newcomers to this area. Their dress and appearance were so different from the people back east. He would never show his surprise, of course.

His gaze caught on another figure inside the pen, and his breathing hitched. A woman. Her dark red dress seemed so unusual in this land that it should have jumped out at him first thing. She must be the rancher's wife. Perhaps she could be persuaded to bake a few treats he could sell at the post, especially if he supplied the flour and molasses. Homesick trappers would pay well for such goods.

One fellow stepped away from the fence as he and Wally rode into the ranch yard. Tanner studied the fellow, and his gaze tripped once more.

Not a man.

Another woman, but she wore men's clothing. The garments did little to disguise her form, though.

"I'll be." Those words mumbled under Wally's breath meant he'd realized that same truth.

Tanner looked back at the two by the fence to see if he'd missed any details there. Yup. The other one he'd thought to be a white man also appeared to be a woman wearing trousers and a man's felt hat.

The Indian? *He* was definitely a man. What in the great states of America was going on here?

He and Wally halted a respectable distance from the woman approaching them, who now stood with her hands braced at that narrow waist. After they dismounted, Tanner removed his hat. "Hello, ma'am. I'm Tanner Mason, and this is Wallace Burke. We're opening a trading post just two passes over, so I guess we'll be your new neighbors." The Indian and the other woman in trousers came to stand with her, and the lady in the dress now stood at the fence, arms on the rail.

The first woman spoke. "I'm Rosemary Collins. These

are my sisters, Faith and Lorelei”—she motioned first to the one beside her, then to the brown-haired beauty in the dress—“and this is our friend and business partner, White Horse.” She nodded to the brave.

Tanner dipped his chin in greeting. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Her hand went back to her waist, a position that gave him the feeling she was accustomed to being in charge. Must be the oldest of the sisters. “We’d heard a trading post was being built. What sort of supplies will you have on hand? Will you trade for furs only? Will you accept special orders?”

He bit the inside of his lip to keep a sober face. No small talk with this one, just directness. But he’d long appreciated forthrightness of every kind.

He nodded to acknowledge the questions. “We plan to stock the necessary items the trappers need as well as trade goods for the Indians. And we’d be happy to special order anything you request.” He glanced at Wally. “Mr. Burke will be traveling back and forth to St. Louis for supplies. As you can imagine, the trips won’t be quick, but he’ll be happy to bring back anything specific you need.”

Her sharp stare swung from his face to Wally’s, then back. He let his own focus shift to the woman and Indian beside her. Then a brief glance at the pretty one still inside the fence. She had an animal at her side. A light-colored calf.

The elder Miss Collins spoke again, forcing his attention back to her. “And what of payment? Will you only accept furs, or coin also?”

Ah, he’d forgotten to respond to that question. The answer must be important to her, or she wouldn’t have asked

again. Though he'd expected to receive furs from nearly everyone out here, he'd take whatever these women gave if it meant ensuring they'd be customers. With as many horses as he saw grazing, they must be selling to someone back east, which meant they likely had another way to get supplies. He'd have to earn their patronage by making things convenient for them, as long as he didn't sacrifice profit for the post. "We're happy to trade for either, ma'am."

"You don't have any milk for sale, do you? Cow's milk or anything else?" The voice called from the fence, and all of them turned to the woman in the dress. The calf stood at her side as she stroked its neck in a steady rhythm. They both studied him expectantly. The animal even let out a pitiful cry. It sounded odd for a calf, deeper and a little more strangled. Had it lost its mother? Maybe that milk cow Tanner had worked so hard to drag along had been worth the trouble after all.

"As it happens, we do have a cow who currently supplies about three gallons morning and eve. I'm planning to sell all but a quart each day."

A smile bloomed across her face, lighting her features like a ray of sunshine. When she spoke, her voice maintained the same sweet tone, though it nearly trembled with joy. "You have milk? Oh heavens, who would have believed it? Yes, we'll take every bit you'll sell us. No matter the cost."

"Lorelei." The older sister's voice held warning, then she spun to face him. "Your price does matter. We won't take a drop for more than two dollars per gallon."

Tanner fought to school his expression. That was the price back in Boston, but they couldn't even get milk in St. Louis for that, much less this land nearly two months'

travel from any city. “Ten dollars for every gallon. I couldn’t let it go for less.”

She raised her brows. “You already have the cow, and the milk will spoil if you don’t sell it. It’s not as if it costs more to feed her on this rich prairie grass than it does back in the States.”

He let the corners of his mouth tip in a friendly way as he dipped his chin to acknowledge the truth of her words. “You’re right. But I suspect there aren’t many milk cows in the area. It won’t be hard to find men willing to buy at my price.”

She snorted, but before she could answer, her sister called out. “Rosie, please.”

His attention swung to the fence before he could catch himself. The woman looked desperate, her and that little calf.

A movement closer to him shifted his focus once more. The Indian took a half step forward. “I will trade. Five horses for the cow.”

The older Miss Collins’s gaze shot to the brave, and Tanner didn’t have to look at her to feel the strength of her glare.

The other man must have felt it too, for he looked to her and attempted an explanation. “White buffalo is . . .” He seemed to be struggling for a word. “The people think have powers. Not see in many winters. Not ever sell or trade. Very . . .” Again, he struggled for a word.

“Special?” Miss Collins’s voice was gentle as she spoke to the man, and it held something much closer to respect than the tone she’d used with Tanner.

The brave’s brow still lined with uncertainty, so she spoke again. “Are there not many white buffalo in this area, then?”

He shook his head. “None. I see one when boy. No more.”

Interesting. Tanner shifted his focus to the animal gnawing at Miss Lorelei’s skirts as she continued to stroke it. So this wasn’t a calf—not of the bovine variety, anyway. And if white buffalo were so rare, perhaps they could work out an arrangement agreeable to all.

He chose his words carefully. “I didn’t realize that was a buffalo calf. It’s an orphan, I assume?” He directed the question to Miss Lorelei.

She regarded him a bit warily. “I found it near its mother, who lay dead on the plain. I’m sure he needs to eat soon.”

That seemed to be her way of saying Tanner had best get on with his suggestion. The little fellow bawled its agreement.

“Perhaps we could work something out. I’d be happy to buy the calf from you and feed him myself. Then he’d be close to the milk cow.” The bargain would save these people the markup he’d have to charge for the milk also. And he could likely buy it for cheaper now than later after they’d spent so much in feeding the animal.

“No!” Miss Lorelei and White Horse spoke at the same time, which was probably why the word sounded so much like a shout.

The man shook his head. “Not trade white buffalo. Harm come if trade.”

Tanner studied the man. The Indians wouldn’t trade it at all? Did that mean they wouldn’t trade to acquire it either? The last thing he needed was a buffalo on his hands that he’d invested a great deal in and couldn’t recoup his costs.

His gaze wandered to Miss Lorelei—a mistake. She turned those pleading eyes on him. He’d trained himself in the Bos-

ton Day Police to look past womanly wiles or manly posturing to find the truth. But he couldn't manage to be indifferent to the desperation radiating from her.

"Perhaps we could settle somewhere in the middle. A gallon for six dollars. Would that be agreeable?"

Lorelei nodded, thankfulness evident in the release of her shoulders. "Yes. Thank you so much."

The sound of a throat clearing from the sister in front of him brought him back to reality. He'd much rather stay lost in the sweetness of the younger sister than face this older one's demands. She reminded him too much of Jessamine.

A reminder of his past that roiled distaste in his belly.

Yet he forced himself to face the woman dressed like a man.

"A single gallon for five dollars, but if we buy two gallons and three quarts every day, we expect a discount. We'll pay ten dollars for that amount."

He just barely bit back a sigh. Only a female would be as stubborn as this.

Clearly not every female, for Miss Lorelei's voice rang out with as much frustration as he felt. "I'll pay the difference, Rosie. Leave it be." Then she turned to him, and the ire leaked from her tone. "Thank you, Mr. Mason. Would you mind if one of us accompanies you back to your trading post now to purchase what you have?"

The calf bawled again, this time louder and more desperate. The sound touched his awareness, but not as much as the care in her voice and the tenderness in her expression when she stared down at the pitiful calf.

The quicker he got out of here, the better. He couldn't allow his emotions any more rein. He turned and mounted

his horse. “I’ll go get what I have and bring it back for you. Sounds like he needs it right away.”

She smiled at him, and that sunray made all the effort seem worth it. Maybe if he was lucky, he would even get to help feed the little guy.

But after that, he couldn’t let her distract him anymore. He had to get the trading post fully stocked so they could be ready for customers. He would make a success of the place or die trying.

