

SISTERS OF THE ROCKIES • 3

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**ROCKY
MOUNTAIN
JOURNEY**
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MISTY M. BELLER

USA Today Bestselling Author

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To my sweet daughter Leah Faith,
my inspiration and namesake for Faith's character.
I love your tenacity, your wit, and your charm.
I knew before you were born
that God made you for great things!

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my
fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

Psalm 91:1-2

ONE



JULY 1839

GREEN RIVER VALLEY (FUTURE WYOMING)

The stallion's muscles coiled beneath Faith as the massive animal prepared to rear. But she wouldn't let him throw her—wouldn't lose control. Exhaling slowly to keep her own body from tensing, she crooned, "Easy, boy."

She had a job to do, and she would not fail. The sooner she finished this horse's training, the sooner the family could continue their search for Steps Right. She gripped the reins tighter and pressed her weight deeper into her heels. If he shied sideways or lunged forward into a bucking fit, she'd be ready. This stallion's determination and endurance were not to be underestimated. Those qualities would make him an excellent cavalry mount . . . *if* she trained him into a solid riding horse first. In this moment, she needed him to walk around the corral without attempting to throw her.

The stallion's front legs lifted off the ground, and her lungs froze as she steadied herself. Then he landed on his toes. He'd risen just enough to threaten a full rear.

“Walk on.” She nudged him forward with her heels. No matter what, she couldn’t let him feel the fear that gnawed at the edges of her confidence. Too much depended on her finishing this animal’s training.

He settled into a flat-footed walk for a half-dozen steps, then his muscles coiled again. The warning came only a heartbeat before his front legs rose up in a full rear.

Her heart surged, and she leaned forward to keep their balance upright, loosening her reins and flicking the ends on his shoulder.

“Walk on!” The words came out more as a roar than a shout, but her tone accomplished her goal.

The stallion dropped his front legs to the ground.

She dug her heels into his sides and said again, “Walk on.”

He obeyed, jiggling forward a few steps, then finally settled into a calmer walk. She worked to make her body relax again. Horses fed on tension. If he sensed it within her, he’d act out more.

“That’s enough for today, Faith.” Rosemary’s commanding voice sounded across the yard from the front porch of their cabin. “End on a good note, then come help me with the food.”

Not now. She was just making headway. Surely Rosie understood she needed to take advantage of every moment when the stallion would cooperate.

Faith let her focus dart toward her sister for only a second before returning to the horse’s ears, which were now pointed firmly in the direction he stared—toward Rosie and their one-year-old niece, Bertie, who was propped on her hip. Distracted like that, he could startle easily.

Faith shook her head and kept her tone pleasant for the

horse's sake. "I think he needs more time cantering to wear off his extra energy. He's still not focusing."

"Save it for tomorrow. I need you in the house."

She grunted her frustration but kept her reins loose so the horse didn't feed off the emotion. Didn't Rosie understand how important it was for her to work the stallion when she could make headway? Why were her plans and goals always the ones that had to be delayed to help the rest of the family? It wasn't as if she was being selfish in riding this stallion. Training the younger horses was one of her main jobs on this ranch that she and her sisters owned together. They were supposed to be running it as equals. But she was the only one who bent to the others' needs.

She halted the stallion and slid to the ground, then led him toward the corral gate, using her sleeve to wipe the sweat running down her temple. July in this mountain country wasn't as hot and humid as it had been back in Virginia, but an afternoon working with the horses in the piercing sun had stripped the strength from her weary body.

As she led the horse toward the barn, a little voice called from the cabin. "Da da da da da." Bertie stood at the top of the porch steps, her pudgy arms waving.

Just the sight of her niece's sweet smile lifted a bit of the exhaustion from Faith's shoulders. Bertie had been walking since Christmas but still always seemed on the verge of losing her balance—and often did.

She tied the stallion to a hitching rail, then strode across the yard toward her niece. She could unsaddle the animal in a moment, but right now she needed the joy that came when she played with Bertie—and to make sure she didn't tumble down those steps.

She clomped up the porch stairs, then bent low and scooped up her niece. “Hello there, my sweet one. Can you say ‘Auntie Faith’?”

Bertie grinned, her round cheeks appling as she revealed a mouth full of mostly new teeth. “Da da da.” That was the sound the child made most. Perhaps because her “dada” Riley doted on her so.

Faith chuckled, then gave the girl a quick tickle in her belly. “Where’s your mama and Aunt Rosie?” Rosie had disappeared inside when Faith approached the porch, probably rushing to stir something on the cookstove.

Rosie had been working hard to prepare a spread of food for the celebration meal to be held that evening—a special farewell supper for their missionary friends who’d been visiting for the past week. Goes Ahead, Elise, and their children would leave tomorrow to continue traveling through the mountains, working with the tribes and sharing their faith.

“I’m right here,” Rosie said from inside the cabin. “Keep Bertie outside, though, so she doesn’t wake Juniper.”

Faith turned back to her niece. “Is your mama sleeping?” Being in the family way again sapped the strength from Juniper.

Though her and Riley’s cabin on the ranch wasn’t far, her sister caught a nap in Rosemary’s room when she could, if she and Bertie were helping with something in the main house.

“Mama.” The child gave a slow nod, the motion bouncing her brown curls.

“That’s good.” Juniper seemed to be faring better this time around, not casting up her accounts every few hours, as

she had done with Bertie. Still, June carried dark shadows under her eyes, and her face had swelled early.

Keep her and the babe safe, Lord. Please.

Lorelei too.

So much had happened since they'd traveled to this land. The other of their sisters who'd recently married had just announced last week that she and Tanner were expecting. So far, she'd shown no signs of sickness, only a constant glow that made her beam all the time.

Bertie rested a hand on Faith's cheek, then seemed to catch herself. She pulled her hand back and ducked her chin, peering up at Faith with a shy smile that nearly melted Faith's heart.

She pulled her close and gave her a tight squeeze. "I love you, Bertie girl."

Bertie squirmed, as she often did when constrained, and Faith released her, adjusting the girl on her hip.

"Owie." Bertie reached into the pocket on her pinafore, as though something had poked her during the hug.

"Did I squeeze you too tight? I'm sorry."

Bertie pulled out something that flashed in the sunlight.

"What is that?" Faith squinted against the sparkle. Whatever it was, the child probably shouldn't be playing with it. Had she absconded with Rosemary's locket that had been passed down from their mother? At least Rosie had something of Mama's.

Faith pushed down the old familiar twinge of jealousy. The one thing *she'd* had to remember Mama by—the stones the two of them had collected together—had been lost when they moved from their Virginia ranch to Richmond after Mama's death.

The child tucked her hand behind her back, her lips pinched, likely knowing she wasn't supposed to have the item.

Faith reached for Bertie's arm. "I'll bet Aunt Rosie wouldn't want you to have that." She kept her voice light and pleasant. "Can you give it to Auntie Faith?"

When she pried Bertie's hand from behind her, the girl finally raised the trinket with her precious grin. "Da."

Faith's breath caught as she focused on the necklace in her niece's hand. This wasn't the locket on its thin gold chain. She reached for the blue crystal beads, but when Bertie tried to pull them away, Faith caught her wrist instead. "No, ma'am."

Bertie's face pinched, and she made a fussing sound, so Faith eased her grip. "You can't play with these, honey. They're very special." She used her other hand to pry the child's fingers open and slip the strand out of her hold.

With the necklace safe, she sighed and held it close to her chest. What would they have done if Bertie broke the cord and lost the beads? This keepsake could never have been replaced, not even if they somehow found the exact same type of beads and string to repair it. The meaning of this treasure would be lost.

Rosie poked her head through the doorway. "Stallion was good today?"

A flash of frustration gripped Faith. These beads were far more important than pleasantries. "Rosie." She held up the necklace. "Look what Bertie had in her pocket."

Rosemary squinted into the sunshine, then flashed a dismissive smile. "Ah. I was showing it to her yesterday. She must have seen which drawer I put it in."

Faith fought to keep anger from her tone. "Why would

you keep the beads where she could reach them? She might break the cord or the beads themselves, and the entire thing would be ruined. We'd never be able to accomplish what Papa asked." It was the entire reason the four of them had left everything and come west.

More than that, this strand had once saved their father's life. A rush of emotion surged through her, stinging her eyes. She turned away so her sister didn't see her childish display. None of the others cried for Papa anymore. It had been three years since his passing.

"Faith-ie."

She hated the way Rosie dragged her name into two syllables when she used that tone.

Her sister tipped her head like she was cajoling a selfish child. "She's not going to hurt the beads. And if she happened to break the cord, we could fix it. I don't think White Horse will mind. You know how much he loves Bertie."

What did White Horse have to do with this? Just because he was the son of the woman who'd saved their father's life more than a decade ago, and just because he'd been the only member of Steps Right's family they'd found when their father's final wish sent them west to find her, didn't mean he was *in charge* of the beads.

Or that he really had any say-so in what happened with them.

Papa had said to take the beads to Steps Right.

She could still see his dark eyes glistening as he'd begged her, his hand gripping hers. "*You're my courageous one, Faithie. You have to make sure this happens.*"

Her sisters had been busy with other tasks in the room—Rosie talking with the doctor, Juniper at the basin pouring

water for him to drink, and Lorelei pulling an extra blanket from the trunk.

Faith alone had stayed at his side. She'd feared those might be his final moments, though it seemed impossible to believe. But maybe God had kept her there, ensuring she was present for his final plea.

"You're my courageous one . . . make sure this happens."

And she would do what Papa asked. No matter the obstacles. No matter if her sisters moved on and forgot their important assignment.

When Faith and her sisters had first arrived in this wild territory, they'd searched quite a bit. They'd even found a cave where she'd stayed as well as a clue she'd left for White Horse that told him she was headed to a waterfall.

But since then, one unexpected obstacle after another had arisen. Then winter came with its massive snows that kept them mostly locked away in this valley, except for regular visits through the pass to see Tanner and Lorelei at the trading post. With spring came foaling season, which tied them to the ranch day and night as nearly a hundred mares gave birth. Rosemary had promised they'd begin searching again for Steps Right in the summer. Now it was nearly the end of July, and they still hadn't set out.

Bertie reached out for her aunt Rosie, and Faith handed the child over, then followed them into the cabin.

"Do you want to play with your blocks now?" Rosemary set the girl on the rug, and Bertie grabbed two wooden blocks with shapes painted on their sides. "We have to be quiet so your mama can sleep."

Rosie turned back to the kitchen area that took up one end of the cabin's main room, and Faith moved toward her

so they could talk in soft tones. She forced a smile into her voice. “When can we go out and search the waterfalls?”

Rosie glanced her way with a frown, but Faith met it with a pleasant, expectant look. “I don’t know. With Lorelei and Juniper both in the family way, now’s not a good time for us to leave.”

Frustration needled deeper, like a sharp bur under a heavy saddle, but she did her best not to let it show. “You said we could go in the summer. This is July. Definitely summer.”

Rosie turned to load bread slices into a basket. “I said *maybe* summer. We can’t go if we’re needed here. Besides, White Horse said his mother’s clue *might* mean she was taking refuge near a waterfall. We don’t know for sure. He’s always said she’ll find a way to reach him if she needs anything.”

Faith spun away from her vexing sister to wash her hands in the basin. “He might be wrong. What if Steps Right needs help and she doesn’t have a way to send him a message? We have to find her. And waterfalls are the only clue we have. We won’t be certain until we search them.”

“And we will. As soon as we have time.”

But would her sisters ever make time for their mission now that they’d settled in here on the ranch? The resolve inside Faith turned to steel. She had to be the strong one and carry out the commission Papa had given.

“And when will that time come? Next year? Ten years? This was the one thing Papa asked of us, Rosie. His *dying wish*. Find Steps Right and return the beads to her.” She gripped the hand towel tighter, lest she say something she regretted. “Aren’t you worried about her? White Horse saw those two braves from his old village leaving the trading

post. He told me he thinks they might be searching for Steps Right. He looked worried too. What if they've already found her?" Panic welled in her chest like it did every time she thought of Steps Right's situation.

The elderly Peigan woman who possessed such a caring heart, who'd devoted her life to healing the sick and injured, unjustly sent away from her home and all she knew. She'd been hiding in these treacherous mountains for three years. What would those warriors do to her if they found her? Take her back to the village and make her endure some kind of trial or punishment?

A shiver slid through her, and she glared at Rosie. "I'm beginning to think you don't care. But I do." The burn of tears swept in fast. She was going to lose control if she didn't stop talking. She dropped her voice for the last bit. "I do care. I care about a helpless woman out there alone in the mountains. And I care about Papa. I *will* accomplish what he asked of us."

Rosie studied her, brows knit as though she didn't understand why Faith was so upset. She reached out and touched Faith's arm, and it took everything within her not to jerk away.

"I care, Faithie. We all do. It's just that we also have to take care of those still with us on this earth. Those who are expecting—" She waved a hand around. "Our family. The ranch. We have responsibilities. Papa would understand that responsibility better than anyone. He would want us to wait for the right time." Her face softened as her eyes turned distant. "I remember how he used to stay with the horses when they colicked, walking them for hours to help them recover from a twisted gut. He did whatever he had to."

Pain pressed in Faith's belly, a twisting that would steal her breath if she let it linger. She had no memory of Papa walking the horses when they colicked. It seemed all the good times had taken place when Faith was too young to remember. She was the baby of the family, so to her Papa had always seemed old—never young and vibrant—as far back as she could recall. The stories of his younger days sounded so thrilling.

Rosemary might be right about Papa understanding responsibility, but that only proved Faith's point all the more. They had a *responsibility* to find Steps Right and return those beads to her. The necklace had once been an heirloom within her own family, passed down through the generations.

Steps Right had been wearing the string when she discovered their father on the plains, nearly dead. While her sister had gone back to their village to get help, she'd stayed with Papa and nursed him through the night, keeping him alive and awake in the cold by having him tell stories of his wife and daughters. A story for every bead on the necklace.

She'd continued to care for him at her village, then when he recovered enough to rejoin his trapping companion, Steps Right had sent the strand of beads with him as a gift.

And as her papa lay dying, he'd tasked his four daughters—and her specifically, in that moment between the two of them—with returning the beads to her so they could be reunited with the Peigan family that had treasured them for generations.

Faith would fulfill that responsibility. Even if she had to do it alone.

Rosemary picked up the basket and turned with a smile. "We'll find her, Faith. I promise. As soon as we can." Then