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Love's MOUNTAIN QUEST

HEARTS
OF
MONTANA
BOOK TWO

MISTY M.
BELLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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

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To my agent, Cynthia.
I love your heart and passion,
and I continue to be amazed
at God's providence
when He brought us together.
I will ever be thankful for you!

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature:
old things are passed away; behold, all things are be-
come new.

2 Corinthians 5:17

ONE

JUNE 25, 1867

SETTLER'S FORT, MONTANA TERRITORY

*S*he woman stood in the wind, skirts billowing, hair flying, as though the gusts swept away all her inhibitions. All her sorrows. The heavy weight of her losses. With the warm gale buffeting her, she seemed to revel in the freedom.

Isaac Bowen couldn't tear his eyes away.

Each time he visited Settler's Fort, he made a point to check on Joanna Watson. This time he'd been lucky enough to spot her on his way into town, in the grassy area beside the swimming hole. The little-boy laughter and splashes filling the air had to belong to her high-spirited son, Samuel.

Since she and her lad were in the party he helped rescue from the mountain wilderness several months before, he couldn't help but feel the need to make sure they fared well. Joanna had rented a house near the edge of town and taken on work as a washerwoman. She and her son seemed

to have what they needed, but worry for her still ate at him. A woman without family in this rough territory faced a difficult existence, but every time he asked, she showed a capable front.

And now, seeing her unencumbered from worries, with the wind brushing her face . . . how could he have not realized the exhaustion she'd carried on their journey? In this moment, her face shone with a radiance that accentuated her beauty. Her pretty features had never been lost on him, but apparently he'd been too dense to see how much life weighed her down. Was it life in the little town of Settler's Fort that caused her weariness? Or simply the challenges of trying to feed and clothe herself and her boy since her husband had succumbed to an ax wound seven months before?

"Ma, come see what I can do," the little boy's voice called from the water.

Mrs. Watson turned toward the stream but stilled when her gaze passed over Isaac. His heart stilled, as well, but he nodded in greeting and nudged his gelding forward. The two packhorses trailed them dutifully, worn out from the week spent traveling the mountains while Isaac hunted and trapped. Once he spent a few minutes with Mrs. Watson, trying to ascertain the truth of how she fared, he'd take his furs and part of the elk meat to trade for supplies at the mercantile. Maybe he'd ride the hour home tonight. Or maybe he'd stop in at the café for a home-cooked meal. The thought raised a growl from his middle.

Mrs. Watson shielded her eyes with a hand as he approached, and Isaac offered a friendly smile.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” He dismounted to greet her eye-to-eye.

“Mr. Bowen. This is a surprise.” She lowered the hand shadowing her face, revealing a soft smile that lit her pretty brown eyes. “Samuel and I are enjoying the pleasant Sunday afternoon.”

He sent a gaze toward the stream just as a red touse of hair rose up from the water, droplets streaming down the boy’s tan back. He shook the water away like a puppy would. “Mr. Bowen. When did you get here?”

Isaac couldn’t help but match the boy’s grin. “Hello, Samuel. I stopped to say howdy on my way into town.”

“I’m glad. Watch what I can do. Mama, did you see me?” Samuel leaned sideways and popped one ear with his palm to dislodge liquid from the other ear.

Isaac glanced back at the boy’s mother, who met his look with a sheepish smile. She raised her voice to answer her son. “I didn’t see. Can you do it again?”

“Watch.” Samuel didn’t stop to ensure she watched, just dropped back under the water.

Isaac stepped closer to the bank’s edge to see what feat the lad had learned, and he could feel the weight of Mrs. Watson’s presence beside him.

Under the water’s surface, Samuel twisted and darted like a tadpole, then rose up with a splash. He shook again, then grinned up at them both. “Did you see me? I can do a flip.”

His smile was so infectious that it was impossible not to match it. “Good job. You’re swimming better than I could when I was your age.”

Samuel beamed, then turned and splashed back under the water, his five-year-old legs kicking for all he was worth.

Isaac chuckled as he turned back to the boy's mother. Being around Samuel made him want to settle in and enjoy life as much as the lad did. But he'd better get moving if he was going to reach the mercantile before they closed. "I'm back from a hunting trip and have extra meat I'd like to give you. Do you want me to leave it at your house?"

A shadow passed over her face, bringing with it the weariness that had been there in days past. "I can't take your food. Surely you need it yourself."

He forced as casual an air as he could manage and shook his head. "I bagged two big elk and a bunch of smaller game. It will go to waste if I keep it all." Which was true, although he'd be trading all the extra he and Pa couldn't take on. But first he'd give as much to Mrs. Watson and her boy as he could get her to take.

Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to Samuel, who'd splashed up to the water's surface again. "You're swimming like a fish." He raised a hand in farewell. "I'm headed on now, Samuel. Take care of your mama. See you soon."

"Bye, Mr. Bowen."

Isaac turned back toward his horses, and Mrs. Watson strolled beside him. "Is there anything I can do for you while I'm in town, ma'am?"

"Thank you for offering, but we're managing just fine." Her soft voice rolled out in a cadence so convincing, it had lulled him into belief the other times she'd responded such.

Yet she must have repairs that needed doing or heavy lifting she couldn't handle.

Unless other men in town saw to her needs. The thought sank in his gut like a stone.

Since he and Pa lived outside Settler's Fort, he didn't make it into town to check on her as often as he'd like. Of course the other men in town wouldn't let her rest, as starved for female attention as many of them were. Did they badger her? Maybe that was why she'd developed such a convincing rebuttal.

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye as he neared his horses. "I'll be in town overnight if there's anything you think of." He wouldn't be pushy, but he couldn't help the need to offer once more.

"Thank you, Mr. Bowen. It was good to see you again."

The only response he could think of was a nod, and then he took up the reins and mounted.

As he rode away, he couldn't help a quick glance back. Mrs. Watson stood in the same place, face tilted toward the sun. Her willowy figure looked so slight with the breeze whipping her skirts, brushing her feathery brown hair around her face.

If only there was more he could do to help her.



Joanna Watson's shoulders sagged under the Monday evening strain. The weight of her worries seemed to wrench every muscle, every weary limb. And as she walked along the quiet main street of Settler's Fort, she let herself succumb to the ache. Just for a moment.

Life was simply too hard sometimes. Just yesterday she'd been watching Samuel dart through the water as they'd enjoyed their Sunday, her one day of rest.

But today's work had exhausted every renewed part of her. If only she hadn't chosen laundry as her line of work in Settler's Fort. But there weren't any other suitable ways to bring in enough wages for food and shelter.

This new life she was trying to create for herself and her son hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped for them. And she wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

The last time she'd had to create a new life—after her parents and sister died in the train crash—she'd married Robert. But he wasn't here to save her now.

She had to manage on her own.

She probably shouldn't have rushed to finish her work early today. Should have worked on the stack of washing she was saving for the next day, but her new friend Laura had taken Samuel swimming again to escape the heat of the late June afternoon. And Joanna hadn't been able to squelch the impulse to meet them with a picnic for an early evening meal.

Her young son had so few pleasures these days. She owed Laura a favor for offering to take him from the heat of their little home and allow Joanna an afternoon to work without having to keep him occupied, too. Swimming had quickly become Samuel's favorite pastime, so he'd jumped at Laura's invitation.

The younger woman had become a good friend over the past month since she'd come to town, almost like a sister.

Maybe they'd grown close because they were both new to town. Or perhaps because they'd both lost almost everyone they held dear. Lord willing, they'd both be able to create the new life they craved.

But now was the time to push away her worries and put on a smile for her son.

The satchel containing the small meal Joanna had scraped together grew heavier the farther she walked past the outskirts of town, along the tree-lined edge of the shallow creek. At last, she neared the section where the waters gathered into a deeper pool, perfect for swimming.

She strained to hear the little-boy laughter that was a trademark of her son's exuberant personality. Samuel had more energy—and could get into more trouble with it—than any child she knew. His liveliness never ceased to cause apprehension when she let him out of her sight—and her protection. But a boy needed an outlet to release his pent-up energy. She had to keep reminding herself that allowing him to enjoy this afternoon with Laura today had been the right choice.

Almost to the water now, she heard no splashing of swimmers. Joanna's pulse and pace quickened. She stepped through the trees around the edge of the swimming hole. "Samuel? Laura?"

Only the faint gurgle of running water answered.

She reached the bank's edge and scanned the stream in front of her. No heads bobbed in the water. No figures relaxed on the stretch of rocky beach. An inspection in both directions still showed nothing.

She pressed down the panic that bubbled up in her chest. There had to be a logical reason. They must have hiked down the creek.

Dropping her food satchel, she cupped both hands around her mouth and yelled, "Samuel! Laura!"

She strained to hear their replies over the pounding of her heart.

No high-pitched voice answered her. Nothing but the trickling current.

Alarm lashed her imagination, creating scenes of horror. What if Samuel had been caught in deep water, a root holding him under? Maybe he and Laura had both drowned trying to free him.

Or Indians. Though she'd rarely seen them, this country was still home to more tribes than she could name. What if a group of them had come along and taken her son for his curly red hair? *Oh, Lord, where is my baby?*

She scrambled through the trees and brush, moving farther and farther downstream as fast as she could weave through the branches.

Over and over, she called their names. How far would they have gone? Had something happened to make them pack up and return home early?

No. She would've seen them on the road. Unless Laura knew of a shortcut. The other woman had lived in Settler's Fort slightly longer than the half year Joanna and Samuel had resided here.

She paused for one final, desperate scream of their names. Only her own voice echoed back.

Dear God, let them be safe. She couldn't lose her son, too. Not after everything else she'd lost.

She had to stop jumping to conclusions. Laura was probably, even now, taking Samuel through a hidden trail on their way back to the little rented house Joanna could barely afford. Maybe they were already sitting at the small table, snacking on biscuits, waiting for her to return.

Joanna turned away from the creek, working her way back through the trees and brush to the road that followed the water. Without her load, she could move faster. Getting home to her boy was all that mattered.

Once she reached the road, she turned toward town and raised her skirts so she could sprint. Just past the swimming hole, a flash of white caught her eye. A sack. It looked like the one she'd seen Laura carry when she'd come to pick up Samuel earlier.

She veered toward the fabric, then paused in front of it, her breath coming in giant heaves. She opened the cloth bag to peer inside. An apple. A blanket. She riffled through the contents to see if anything was hidden underneath.

Nothing.

Turning to the ground around her, she scanned the area for something—anything—she'd missed. There were no clothes strewn around, although the grass was pressed down in this spot like people had recently spent time here.

Once more, she screamed her son's name into the air, tasting her desperation with the cry.

Still no answer.

Gathering her skirts, she ran toward town again. Every

few minutes she stopped to call for Laura and her boy, which gave her lungs a chance to gulp in air. Still, no response.

God, please let them be at home. They had to be. She would snatch her son into a giant hug and breathe in his boy scent—a combination of dirt and sunlight and creek water.

As she entered town, the streets seemed even more deserted than before. Settler's Fort was a quiet town, mostly occupied by miners, but a few families also resided here. People must still be hard at work for the afternoon, or otherwise hiding inside from the fierce sun. This was the warmest June she could remember in the mountain country.

Her side ached as though pierced by a knife, but she didn't slow her stride until she reached her door. It gave way beneath her push, and she almost fell inside. "Samuel? Laura?"

The dark interior tightened the knot in her belly.

"Laura!" She yelled loud enough to wake the neighbors, but only a thick silence answered her call.

"Oh, God, where are they?" She pressed a hand to her forehead, working to rein her thoughts into a semblance of order. Maybe they'd gone to the mercantile. Samuel always loved to look around there, and he usually wheedled for a sweet. Maybe he'd talked Laura into stopping.

She spun and charged back down the street toward the shop she'd already passed twice. This mercantile didn't have glass-front windows like those back in St. Louis, so she had no idea who was inside as she opened the solid wood door.

The bell jingled, and she scanned the interior, squinting to see in the dimness. “Laura? Samuel?” It might be poor manners to raise her voice in the store, but there were too many shelves and barrels they might be standing behind.

And the fear inside her couldn’t be contained any longer.