



# Hope's HIGHEST MOUNTAIN

HEARTS  
— OF —  
MONTANA  
BOOK ONE

MISTY M.  
BELLER

"I'm a huge fan of Misty Beller and highly recommend her to my readers and anyone else looking for historical adventure and romance."

—Bestselling author TRACIE PETERSON

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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  
Bloomington, 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: Hope's highest mountain / Misty M. Beller.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, 2019. | Series: Hearts of Montana ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2019016256 | ISBN 9780764234866 (casebound) | ISBN 9780764233463 (trade paper) | ISBN 9781493421701 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Montana—Fiction. | GSAFD: Western stories | Love stories | Christian fiction

Classification: LCC PS3602.E45755 H67 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019016256>

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

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Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

Author is represented by Books & Such Literary Agency.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my editor, Raela Schoenherr,  
for believing in me and not giving up  
on me until God's perfect timing.

You're an amazing lady,  
and I'm blessed to work with you!

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the  
uttermost parts of the sea;  
Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right  
hand shall hold me.

Psalm 139:9–10 KJV

# ONE

*My Darling Rachel,*

*You were everything to me. You still are. Don't ever forget that.*

*I saw a beaver today that reminded me of you. The creature paddled to the edge of the river and peered up at me through the water, just like that summer you learned to swim in the Ohio.*

*Your mama could barely pull you from the river to eat and sleep, you loved swimming so much. When you did come home, water dripping from your red curls, you always carried some treasure you'd gathered—smooth river rocks or a pail of tadpoles you planned to keep as pets. That was the summer you earned your nickname, sweet Ducky.*

*Mama didn't care for the title at first, but the name captured your personality so well, I couldn't help myself. Always swimming. Always smiling. My little Ducky.*

*I only wish I would have watched you swim more often instead of spending long days away from you and Mama. So much I missed. If I had it to do over again, I'd*

*have kicked off my shoes and dove into the water with you. Played games to see who could reach the shore first or who could hold their breath the longest. I would have joined in any amusement you thought of, just to spend another marvelous hour with you.*

*I miss you every hour of every day.*

*Papa*



OCTOBER 1866  
MONTANA TERRITORY

They say the last man who attempted this died in the doin'. Rest his soul."

A frigid gust of wind ripped around the freight wagon. Ingrid Chastain pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders. She tucked her chin into her collar, blocking out both the icy air and the images their driver's morbid words conjured. This rugged cliffside might be as perilous as the old man described, but the staggering beauty of the mountains around them caused her chest to pulse, as though she was just now coming alive.

The mules plodded ever upward as the side of the mountain fell away on their left. It seemed a wonder this road could have been carved into the edge of such a jagged cliff. Every difficult step carried them higher, almost eye level with the majestic peaks surrounding them. This land possessed a strength she'd never imagined possible.

"Was the traveler properly prepared for the elements?" Her

attention shifted back to the unlikely pair on the bench seat in the front of the wagon. Father, with his newly purchased fur coat, sat upright and confident beside their driver, a hunched gray-haired man in worn buckskins. Father spoke again, “Any endeavor worth doing can be harmful if not attempted correctly.” Of course he would look at the story from the most logical approach.

Ingrid slid a glance at Beulah, their quiet maid, perched across from her. The supplies almost buried Beulah’s ample curves but didn’t hide her dark gaze swimming with worry. She looked away from Ingrid, down to their pet dog who’d nestled in her lap. Did she regret her determination to accompany Father on this trip of mercy? The gentle maid had been with them as far back as Ingrid could remember and had as tender a heart as any woman alive. When the desperate wire came, begging Father to send smallpox vaccines to an obscure mining town in the Montana Territory, Beulah had insisted on accompanying Ingrid and her father. There would likely be a need for nurses if the smallpox outbreak had spread.

Their driver didn’t answer Father’s words right away, merely hacked a raucous cough, then spoke to the mules as they climbed upward on the rocky trail. “Git up, boys.” He added more encouragement with a flick of the reins. At last, he sent a sideways glance to Father. “I reckon’ Angus Jones knew about these mountains as much as anyone. I ’spect he did as well as he could.”

A moment of foreboding silence hovered in the air, mingling with the cloud of breath from their driver’s words. “We’ve already passed the spot that did him in.”

Father’s shoulders relaxed. “Well then, Mr. Sorenson. We’ll make it through just fine. I have faith in you, these mules, and

especially in our Lord, who has promised to be our Salvation and Deliverer.”

Mr. Sorenson didn't respond but hunkered down a little more, his elbows pressing on his legs. He coughed again, a rough bark this time, shooting another white cloud into the air.

“When we camp, I'll prepare a tea that will help your ailment.” Father's voice hummed low, the tone he used with his patients.

Their driver leaned forward and flicked the reins on the mules' backs again as the brutal slope steepened. Ahead, the road bent in a switchback as it climbed toward the summit. The choice Mr. Sorenson made to use only a two-mule hitch to pull their substantial load made sense now. The tight turn would be a difficult angle for a longer rig pulled by more animals.

He guided the mules wide to take the turn, and another cough jolted the man's shoulders. He collapsed over with a ragged gasp.

“Sorenson?” Papa's shout came just as the driver dropped the reins. The leather straps bounced unguided against the wooden brace.

Ingrid's heart surged to her throat. She lunged forward, over the bench, scrambling for the leathers. Father grabbed Sorenson, and she slid her willowy frame under his arms as she closed her hands around the thick straps.

A mule let out a blood-curdling bray, and the wagon seemed to hover for a second. Or maybe a long minute.

Then the conveyance slid. The mule cried out again, this time sounding hoarse and strained.

The flap of Father's coat hindered her view of the animals. She clutched harder at the straps in her hands. Though panic stole her breath, she attempted to shake the reins, the way

Sorenson had when urging the mules forward. “Git up!” Her voice didn’t hold the strong command of their mule-whacker. Only shrill fear.

A loud crack splintered the air.

The wagon slid backward. Her grip tightened on the straps, clutching with every bit of strength. Though the wagon shifted beneath her, the animals hitched to the leathers didn’t seem to move. The mules pulled her forward as the wagon slid backward, hauling her up on the bench between her father and their driver.

Father yelled. Someone screamed. Whether a man or woman, she didn’t know.

Ingrid pulled the reins even harder, trying to end this madness. Her chest caught a hard blow on the front of the wagon—the footboard. She tried to brace herself against it, not finding purchase with her body.

But she refused to release the reins. Holding tight to the connection with the mules was their only hope of keeping them all from sliding down the side of the mountain.

Arms pulled at her. Or maybe it was the wagon pressing into her chest, wrenching her in two. She fought harder to keep her grip.

For a dizzying moment, she was rolling. Floating. Falling.

Something hard and heavy crashed into her leg. Then . . . blackness.



Micah Bradley forced one foot in front of the other as the icy wind surged along the mountain crag, buffeting his neck beneath his beaver-skin hat. He almost didn’t notice the gusts

anymore. Not much anyway. Except when the icy fingers snuck under his defenses.

A hoarse cry filled the air, stilling his feet mid-stride.

He strained to hear above the howling gusts. A mountain lion? Or maybe the eerie wail of wind sweeping around the rocks?

There, it came again. A mule?

No wagon train would dare venture through these mountains so near to winter. The first snowstorm appeared to be only hours away.

He plunged forward, angling higher up the mountain as he lengthened his stride. It must be another trapper. Yet something about the cry set the hairs of his nape on end and pressed him forward.

He rounded an outcropping of rocks, bringing the wagon road into view in the distance. A figure shifted on the trail. A man? His heart gave a leap. He'd not seen a person in weeks. He squinted to focus.

Two forms, actually. Animal, not people. One must be the mule he'd heard. Micah lengthened his stride. Where there were mules, there had to be men to handle them.

The animals lingered on the mountain road, waiting. But for what? No man moved around them. At least, none he could see.

Something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones. The same way he used to know his doctoring skills were about to be summoned, even before a pounding knock sounded on his door.

That had all been so many desolate years ago. Too bad the instincts hadn't died along with everything else he'd loved.