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Faith's MOUNTAIN HOME

HEARTS
OF
MONTANA
BOOK THREE

MISTY M.
BELLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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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: Faith's mountain home / Misty M. Beller.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, 2021. | Series: Hearts of Montana ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2020035713 | ISBN 9780764238116 (casebound) |

ISBN 9780764233487 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781493421725 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories. | Western stories.

Classification: LCC PS3602.E45755 F35 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020035713>

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.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my line editor, Jen Veilleux.
Your detail, your ability to strengthen any story line,
your kindness, and, above all, your patience
have blessed me beyond measure. I'm so grateful
to work with you!

For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7b

ONE

LATE SEPTEMBER 1867
SETTLER'S FORT, MONTANA TERRITORY

 *Just a little farther.*

Laura Hannon dared another step on the rock ledge that wrapped around the mountain. The flat space was just wide enough for a person to walk, as long as she stayed close to the stone mountainside on her right. The sheer drop on her left stole her midsection every time she allowed herself to look over the edge, so she kept her focus on the path in front of her. Of course, it would be impossible not to occasionally lift her gaze to take in the magnificent view of the mountain cliffs surrounding her.

This was why she'd come out here, after all. To escape into the beauty of the landscape. To remember that her problems were but a tiny dot compared to the vastness of the mountains God created. And yet, He cared about each one and loved her enough to help her through anything she might

face. She paused to soak in that thought as she inhaled a deep breath of the cool, invigorating air.

Then she stepped forward again. Her boot slipped, skidding toward the edge of the cliff. Bits of loose stone skittered out from under her foot, tumbling off into empty air. With a squeal she scrambled to the right, throwing her weight toward the rock wall, away from the edge. She landed hard on her right foot, sending a jolt of pain through the ankle that had always been weak, ever since she broke it as a young child.

As she struggled to settle her trembling and still her racing heartbeat, she repositioned her feet onto solid stone. The right ankle held, only a little pain still throbbing through the joint.

Barely daring to breathe, she eased upright, pulling away from the cliff wall just enough to stand straight.

She took a deep breath, then eased the air back out. She was fine. She'd not fallen, and if she was careful, she could explore a bit farther before turning back.

Turning her face so the brisk wind fanned the loose tendrils away from her cheeks, she soaked in the crisp autumn air. This freedom was what she needed. Out in the beauty of these mountains, she could sense God's spirit. Feel the peace she couldn't seem to grasp anywhere else.

Even in the cooling temperature of late afternoon, perspiration beaded on her face. But the natural views and physical exertion were exactly what she needed to clear her head. To restore some semblance of peace to her raw nerves. She'd thought hiding herself away as an assistant in the doctor's

clinic these last three months would soothe the lingering effects from the kidnapping.

At first, the peaceful atmosphere around the Bradleys' home and clinic had provided some healing. But lately, the walls had seemed to close in on her. Especially since every day, she helped care for one of the men who'd taken part in her kidnapping. Aaron hadn't been one of those scoundrels who'd hurt her. In fact, he'd actually tried to help her escape once during that awful ordeal, and he'd paid far worse for his part than she'd ever meant him to when she shot him. An accident that shattered his left thighbone and possibly rendered him unable to walk for the rest of his life.

She still battled the churning in her middle when she thought about the effect of that one single mishap. If she'd only taken a half second longer to focus her aim . . . if only Aaron hadn't dived for Rex to stop him from shooting her. She might have hit the man she'd intended to shoot—the one who'd been aiming his gun at her.

“God, help me move forward somehow,” she whispered into mountain air.

After another moment relishing the breeze, she turned back to the path she'd been following. She inched her way along the ledge, circling the cliff's side as she stepped over crumbled leaves and mountain goat droppings. How wonderful to be one of the wild creatures who so easily perched on the side of this precipice, with a majestic view of treetops and distant peaks spread out as far as the eye could see.

Nothing but God's creation. This was a view she could take in for the rest of her life, forgetting about the town

hidden below—and the man whose presence served as a constant reminder of what she so desperately wanted to leave behind.

A bird twittered in the distance, pulling her from her reverie, drawing her focus back to the path. Pressing close to the cliff on her right, she took tiny steps around the curving stone. Now that she'd finally broken loose from her obligations for an afternoon, the urge to do something daring grew stronger and stronger inside her.

The mountain goat trail climbed upward, through the crevice between a boulder on her left and the sheer mountain face on her right. Down onto another ledge, she stepped around a jagged stone protruding onto the path.

A black hole appeared in the cliff face beside her, stopping her midstride. A cave? She'd seen a few caves on her journey west from Missouri, and something about their mystery beckoned to her every time. What people or animals had taken refuge within? Outlaws? Bears? Mountain lions?

The opening sat low, only as high as her waist. Maybe this was only a deep indentation in the rock, not a true cave. She lifted her satchel strap over her head and bent low to peer inside. Darkness met her view, so black she couldn't see anything within. She reached out, expecting to brush cold stone. Her fingers touched only empty air.

She stretched her arm farther in. Still nothing. Maybe this was a cave. The ones she'd seen before all had tall openings and shallow insides, so she could see all the way in without entering. This opening seemed more like it led to a deep, dark den.

She jerked her hand back as her pulse leapt faster. It was still too early for bears to hibernate, but a mountain lion or any other manner of beast could be inside. Maybe she should move on.

But . . . her curiosity warred within her. She could at least light a match and peek inside. She wouldn't go far until she knew the place was empty.

Opening the possibles bag she tended to carry with her when she went out by herself, she fumbled past the pistol, the knife fastened in its sheath, and the leather-wrapped food. Finally, her fingers brushed the long, thin matchbox. Too bad she hadn't packed a candle. She'd only brought the matches in case she needed to light a campfire. After the last time she'd ventured out for a walk and ended up kidnapped for a week, she'd never be caught unprepared again.

It took a few tries to strike a small flame, and she held the light forward into the dark hole. The tiny glow illuminated the thick black, flickering off the rock wall on both sides for only a short distance before the wall on the left seemed to fall away.

Still bent low, she grabbed her satchel and inched forward into the darkness, extending the match in front of her. The opening was even deeper than she'd expected, and she shuffled several steps inside.

As though the spark of her match sprang twice its size, the dim, flickering light finally grew around her, opening up a cavern that stole her breath.

This massive room contained a ceiling that rose to at least twice her height. She stood and took in the expanse around

her. To her right, the rock stretched beside her in a solid wall. But to her left, the cavern extended twice the width of her bedchamber back at the doctor's clinic. This entire place was probably the size of the cabin where she'd lived her first eighteen years.

Larger, even. She hadn't yet seen the back wall.

Stepping forward, she peered into the murky depths that her tiny match tried to illuminate. The heat at her fingers grew intense, drawing her focus back to the matchstick. She'd have to either drop the stub or blow it out.

She sank to her haunches, then rested the burning stump on the stone floor and reached into her bag for the matchbox. The flame from the first had almost burned out before she finally found a second match to light.

The new flame blazed to life, and she quickly rose and stepped farther into the cavern. To examine everything, she'd need a candle—or better still, a lantern. But at least she could see how far this cavern went before she used up all her matches. Maybe later she could come back with a better light. Exploring this cave was exactly the adventure her spirit craved.

As she advanced farther, something skittered across the floor. She lowered the light just in time to see a mouse scuttle over the stone, only an arm's length away. She barely held in her shriek, suppressing it quickly into a gasp. There was no telling what other animals might be in here. Too much sound could bring on an attack.

A scan with the light didn't show any more creatures. Nothing alive anyway. Plenty of dead insects littered the

stone floor, along with leaves and who knew what else. She pressed the satchel and matchbox to her chest as she worked to gather the remnants of her courage.

A little farther ahead, strange spiky rocks came into view, some hanging from the high ceiling with tips pointing downward, others rising up from the floor to point upward. In one place, the upper and lower spikes met in a narrow column, no thicker in the middle than her thumb.

With her next step, the floor dropped out from under her, and she barely caught herself as the stone sloped downhill. She held the match low to better see the ground. The descent steepened in only that one place, dropping about the height of a porch step.

She eased forward carefully, then reached in her case for another match. She'd only brought five with her, so she wouldn't be able to stay much longer. But she still couldn't see the end of the cavern. The flame ate away at the match quickly, and she scrambled to ready a new stick for lighting.

“Miss Hannon?”

She spun at the sound of a masculine voice behind her. At the same moment, the flame reached her fingers, singeing her skin with its fiery touch. She flung the match, dropping her satchel as she scrambled. Her feet tangled beneath her, and the box of matches slipped from her fingers. She struggled to keep her balance. The uneven stone caught her boot, but her body was already twisted in its effort to stay upright.

With a cry, she fell forward onto her knees, the stubborn boot of her right foot stuck in a dip in the uneven stone floor. Her hands caught her from falling even more, and she braced

herself on hands and knees for a suspended heartbeat. She had to get up, had to know who stood at the entrance of the cave. A man who knew her name.

Her mind flashed back to the last time she'd been discovered. The fierce anger on Bill's face when he spotted her trying to hide in the bushes. The rage in his eyes as he'd stalked forward. She'd been desperate to get away, grabbing little Samuel's hand and clambering down the bank toward the stream. But her skirt had caught on a tree, slowing her down just enough for Bill's meaty hand to grip her. The pain in his clutch radiated through her arm and up her shoulder. The ropes they'd tied her in had cut into her wrists, leaving scars that still ached with memory.

But it wasn't her arm or wrists that hurt now. She blinked, fighting her best to return to the present.

Her knees. Her ankle. Had she injured anything else?

"Miss Hannon?"

She jerked her head up at the voice drawing nearer. Who had found her? And why?

"Are you injured?"

The voice sounded familiar but . . . it wasn't Bill. Bill was gone. Dead. Hanged for shooting the sheriff. She struggled to orient herself to the present.

The silhouette of a man appeared in the cave opening. Recognition washed over her.

"Nate Long?" Her pounding heart didn't know whether to speed up or slow down at his presence. Why was the brother of one of her patients following her into the mountains, a good half-hour's hike from town?

Besides, this man wasn't *just* the brother of a patient. He'd also been a member of Bill's gang.

Only . . . Nate hadn't been there when she and Samuel were kidnapped. He hadn't been one of the men planning to hurt her. When he'd discovered the crime, he spoke out against Bill and Rex's horrible plans—even tried to free her and then had been tied up right along with them.

Still, he'd ridden with those vile men for years and taken part in their lawless robberies.

Since the band had been captured and Nate freed to make restitution, he'd seemed like a changed man. In truth, she sometimes had trouble believing he could have committed the crimes he'd been accused of. He'd spent countless hours at his brother's side, taking over her role as nurse when he could and doing his best to keep up Aaron's flagging spirits.

But why was Nate *here*? Had he followed her? For what purpose?

The match she'd dropped flickered out, blanketing the cave in darkness, save for the light filtering in from the small opening. Pinned between a cavern and a criminal, her heart hammered enough to nearly force its way out of her chest.

"Are you hurt?" Nate had paused just inside the cave. He probably couldn't see more than thick blackness inside, what with his eyes not yet adjusted from the light outside.

The question brought to life the ache in her legs, the pain in her right ankle. Pushing her weight more on her hands, she eased that foot out of the dip in the rock that had snagged it, and the action sent a knife of agony through the joint.

She did her best to quash the groan in her throat as her limb seemed to light on fire.

“You *are* hurt. Miss Hannon, what can I do to help?” Nate’s tone echoed with worry, and he shuffled forward. Laura could see the outline of his hands waving in front of him against the light behind him.

“What are you doing here?” Hopefully he would only hear the determined demand in her voice, not the edge of fear she was trying to suppress. Being alone with a man this far from town brought back too many vicious memories of that last time. Panic climbed up her chest, but she forced herself to stay calm.

Pushing down the pain in her leg, she shifted her hand over the floor until she brushed the fabric of her satchel, then quietly rooted around inside and found her pistol. Over these past quiet months at the doctor’s office, she’d come to think of Nate very differently than before—almost to trust him—but she couldn’t be too careful. Not in this remote place with no other person near enough to hear a scream.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was leaving work at the mine, and I had just reached the base of the mountain when I saw you slip on the rock ledge. I was coming up to make sure you weren’t injured, then saw you duck into this cave. Where are you hurt? Have you any more light?” His voice rang so earnest, so concerned. The tension in her nerves eased.

Yet she couldn’t seem to still the galloping in her chest.

“I’m not hurt.” Her leg screamed that the words were false, but she couldn’t let him know she’d been weakened.

Couldn't put herself at a disadvantage. "My matches spilled. Go back outside, and I'll be there as soon as I gather them."

"Are you sure?" His voice hesitated, sounding concerned. "Can I carry something for you?"

"I have it." With the pistol and satchel in one hand, she scooped up the matches and their case, then shoved them in her bag. Nate might not mean harm, but she would only feel safe when they were around other people. And it didn't seem he would leave until she proved she could manage on her own.

She straightened her skirts and shifted her feet to stand, but moving the right boot sent a shot of pain through that ankle. Gritting her teeth, she raised up, keeping her balance mostly on her left side.

With her first step, she bit back a cry. The ankle didn't buckle, but she had to lock her jaw against the pain coursing through her.

"Miss Hannon?" Nate's tone came out tentative. "I won't hurt you, I promise. I only want to make sure you're safe. Let me help."

She shifted her leg to attempt to walk up the incline toward the entrance. Her right leg protested, so she dropped her hands to the floor and tried to walk on all fours, at least until she made it through the cave opening. With the revolver and satchel in one hand, the position proved extremely awkward, but she was able to move forward. Good thing the darkness hid her posterior raised up in the air. No need to add insult to injury.

She made it to where Nate stood, but she may as well

continue all the way outside before facing him, since she'd have to duck under the low cave opening anyway. He stepped aside to allow her to pass.

The bright sunlight pierced her eyes, forcing a squint as she waddled out of the entrance and used the cliff wall to help her stand. While Nate emerged behind her, she slung the satchel strap over her head and moved the revolver to her shooting hand. She kept the gun down by her side, almost hidden in her skirt. No need to draw attention to the weapon, but she'd have it ready if she needed to defend herself.

After ducking out of the cave, Nate straightened and turned to her. Black dirt smudged his face, the edges of his hairline curling a darker brown with dried sweat. He must be telling the truth about having just come from his work in the mine. Evening lit the western sky, so the timing would be right.

His gaze slid down the length of her, snagging on the gun at her side, then returned to her face. "Please don't be afraid. Is your foot injured?"

"Only a slight twist of my ankle. I'll take it slow going back, so you've no need to worry about me."

His brows lowered. "Are you sure?" The earnest concern in his green eyes made her hesitate. But only for a heartbeat.

Even if he could be trusted, she needed to be independent. If life had taught her nothing else these past few years, she'd learned that lesson all too well. She gave a decisive nod. "I'm certain." If she had to crawl all the way back to town, she'd manage.

He motioned to the path beyond her, that thin ribbon of flat rock she'd followed to reach this place. "Go ahead, then."

She wouldn't be able to walk without a strong limp, and there was no sense in calling attention to her injury. "I'll come behind you." She raised her chin and leaned against the rock wall to allow him space to pass. Then she waved the same direction he had.

The breath he blew out made his frustration clear, but he straightened and marched forward. Their clothing almost brushed as he slid past her on the narrow ledge, and she caught the scent of a long, hard workday. And maybe a hint of damp mustiness from the mine.

He strode about ten steps down, then stopped and looked back at her. "I can't leave you stranded here."

Of course he couldn't. Nate had always seemed the kind of man who couldn't resist being responsible for those around him. Especially those weaker.

She would have to show him she could walk.

Lord, make my ankle strong. Please.

With one hand on the cliff beside her to help bear her weight, she gripped the pistol in her other and took a tentative step forward. Using the rock wall for support, she managed to traipse along the flat stone path, one painful step at a time.

When they reached the place where the stone ledge ended and the grassy downhill slope began, her screaming ankle forced her to pause. Nate had stayed just in front of her, casting anxious looks back at her, and he stopped now, too.

Without the cliff wall for support, the distance between this mountain and the town—what had been only a half-hour's brisk walk—now stretched interminably. She'd never

arrive at the clinic before dark at the pace she'd managed these past minutes. And without support to keep some of the weight off her ankle . . .

Nate moved to her side. "Hold on to my shoulder."

Maybe she should resist, but the pain shooting up her leg had numbed her better judgment. Without a word, she raised her right arm, and he slipped into place beside her. He stood almost a head taller than she did, so he had to bend in order to wrap his arm around her waist.

The warmth of his closeness should have put her on edge, but something about his manner eased her fear as they took their first tentative steps.

Slowly, they progressed over the rocks she'd clambered up so easily before. It seemed to take at least half an hour just to get back to firm soil. They certainly wouldn't reach the clinic before nightfall.

A root of fear poked through her pain. Would it be dangerous to be out with him after dark? She pressed the thought down. It couldn't be any more dangerous than in daylight. And Nate hadn't done anything to give her the slightest alarm since they'd left the cave. In fact, he was going through a great deal of trouble to help her. She focused on breathing steadily, doing everything she could to calm her irrational thoughts.

Her arm ached from clinging to his shoulder. Which wouldn't be so bad if her ankle didn't feel as though someone pounded it with an iron mallet during each step.

"Let's stop a minute so you can rest." Nate motioned to a fallen tree.

"I don't need to rest. Ingrid and the doctor will worry if

I'm not back by dark." Ingrid had assumed the role of older sister these past few months Laura had lived with them and worked in the clinic.

He helped her take another agonizing step. "If I go to them for help, will you wait here?"

The thought stiffened her spine. As much love and gratitude as she'd developed for Ingrid and Doc Micah, she couldn't always be turning to them for help. In those first weeks after the kidnapping, she'd let herself rest under the shadow of the Bradleys' protection and nurturing care, but she'd let that condition continue far too long. She had to stand on her own two feet now—very literally, in this case.

She shook her head. "Let's keep going."

He didn't speak again for a long while, just kept his steady presence there to support her. The longer she gripped his shoulder and leaned against him, the easier it was to imagine what it would be like to have someone to lean on any time she needed it.

Ingrid and the doctor had been gifts from God, but sometimes their nurturing felt a little . . . smothering. If only she had someone who was there beside her when she needed them, yet not overbearing. A partner.

Just the way her brother Will had been.

A fresh pain stabbed at her, but this time nearer her heart. Her brother would never be there to walk alongside her again. No one could ever take his place, but the gentle touch of the man now bearing part of her weight made this one situation better at least.

But thoughts like that would only get her into trouble.