

Forsaken (Beartooth, Montana, Book 3) (Beartooth, Montana, 3)

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Danger runs high and passions burn hot in Montana's wild country

Big-city detective Bentley Jamison is a long way from home in the Beartooth wilderness when one of local rancher Maddie Conner's ranch hands goes missing. Towering mountains and a small, tight community are as unfamiliar to Jamison as herding sheep, but he's never shied away from a challenge. As the new deputy sheriff, he's sworn to protect every inch of this rough terrain—starting with unraveling a mystery that has left Maddie a wide-open target.

Maddie's as beautiful—and untamable—as the land around them. Like Jamison, she won't back down from danger. But desire that flares hotter than their tempers only raises the stakes when a fierce storm traps them in the high mountains. Caught in a killer's sights, Jamison and Maddie must trust one another, because now survival...and love...are all that matter.

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The horse stumbled under him as he plunged down the steep mountainside, but he spurred on the mare. Around him, the dark pines swayed and sighed in the wind as he crashed down through them, his only thought to reach the ranch alive.

Terror quilled the hair on the back of his neck, but he didn't dare turn around. Fighting to stay in the saddle, he raced along the creek before charging into the fast-running stream. The clear water showered up in an icy wave that soaked him to the skin and stole his breath.

His horse bolted up the other side, forcing him to cling to the saddle horn to stay on his mount. A pine bough caught him in the face, a sharp twig scraping across his cheek and cutting into his flesh.

Behind him, he heard a familiar sound over the roar of his pulse and the howling wind and the thundering hooves of his horse echoing through the timber. Behind him was that unearthly silence that had chased him out of the Beartooth Mountains.

Even as he rode the horse harder, he knew he'd never be able to outrun it—or the smell of death lingering on his skin.

Deputy Sheriff Bentley Jamison was the only one in the office when the call came in.

"That you, Frank?" a grating elderly male voice asked when the dispatcher put the call through.

"Sheriff Frank Curry is out of the office. This is Deputy Sheriff Bentley Jamison. What can I do for you?"

"Bentley Jamison? Never heard of you."

Jamison must have said the next words a dozen times a day since he'd recently joined the force. "I'm new."

"Huh," the man said with a chuckle. "Bet you ain't from around here, either."

That was a bet the man would win. At least he hadn't asked what most people did on meeting the new deputy. "What the devil are you doing way out here?"

"What can I do for you?" Jamison asked.

"Well, this is Fuzz Carpenter. You don't know me, but I just run across a kid comin' out of the Beartooths. He was a-ridin' hell-bent for leather like the devil was chasin' him. Had blood all over him. I flagged him down to try to find out what was wrong, but he wasn't makin' an ounce of sense. All I could get out of him was that he worked for the Diamond C sheep ranch. That's 'bout all I can tell ya, exceptin' I didn't like the look in his eyes. Somethin' bad happened back up in those mountains, sure as hell."

Jamison wrote the words Diamond C Ranch on the pad next to his phone. "How long ago was this and where exactly?"

"Not ten minutes ago up the Boulder Road. He was a-headin' back to the ranch, I'm supposing, since he was ridin' in that direction last I saw of him."

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll check it out."

The man grunted in response and hung up.

Jamison asked directions to the Diamond C from the dispatcher then climbed into his patrol SUV and headed toward what the locals called the Boulder. It was actually the Boulder River valley. As he left Big Timber, Montana, he followed the river, the tall thick cottonwoods only giving him glimpses of the clear, green water.

The valley was wide, broken up by plowed fields and creeks that ran down to the river in a winding trail of pines and cottonwoods. With breathtaking beauty, mountains soared up around him, snowcapped and covered in dark pines.

The nearer he got to the Diamond C, the more the valley narrowed. Sheer rock cliffs towered a thousand feet over the two-lane paved road, and ranches became fewer and farther between.

He passed the Natural Bridge and waterfalls up into the Absaroka mountain range, or the Beartooths as locals called them because of one jagged crag that looked like a bear's tooth.

Not far after that, the pavement ran out and he found himself in a tight canyon with nothing but the roaring river still full from spring runoff and high mountains hemming him in.

The Diamond C was snuggled in a coulee back off an even narrower dirt road and across a private rickety bridge spanning the river. It was early June in Montana and the snow-fed creeks were all running high.

As he came over a small rise, he saw the house and low sheep barns. Wind buffeted his patrol SUV, letting out a low howl. Nearer to the house, he saw a lone wooden weather-grayed rocker teetering back and forth in the blustery wind at the edge of a wide porch. Freshly hung sheets billowed and snapped on the clothesline nearby.

He'd had his share of premonitions before. Several of them had saved his life. But none had ever been as strong as the feeling of dread that washed over him as he drove toward the white clapboard two-story farmhouse.

Madison "Maddie" Conner felt the change in the air just a moment before she heard the vehicle approaching. The wind had been blowing all night and morning, screaming down out of the mountains, sending anything not nailed down cartwheeling across the yard.

She'd awakened in the middle of the night when one of the big metal garbage cans had taken off, banging across the wide expanse between house and barn before crashing into the side of the shed. It had been difficult getting back to sleep. Everything was always darkest at that hour-especially her worrying thoughts.

Since rising, she'd kept busy. But a feeling of unease had burrowed under her skin like a splinter, festering as the day progressed. Finally at midmorning and unable to shake off her dismal mood, she'd tried to reach her sheepherder by radio. So far she hadn't been able to raise him or his tender, who were both back in the mountains.

Branch Murdock often purposely forgot to take his radio with him when he was out checking the sheep. He refused to carry a cell phone, not that she blamed him. There was little coverage back in the mountains anyway. She'd told herself she'd try him later.

Stepping out on the porch now, she leaned against the railing and watched the patrol SUV pull to a stop in front of the house. She'd expected to see Sheriff Frank Curry, a handsome fiftysomething big man with a drooping handlebar mustache, climb out.

The man who emerged after the dust settled wasn't Frank-but he was as large and broad-shouldered.

Maddie squinted with both curiosity and an inkling of concern as a man in what she estimated as his thirties tilted back his Stetson on his thick head of brown hair to look in her direction. His eyes were pale and hooded. She could make out enough of his features under the shaded brim of his cowboy hat to realize she'd never seen him before.

He wore the entire sheriff's deputy uniform from the tan shirt to the creased-front slacks and dress boots. She'd never seen any of the local law enforcement in anything but the tan shirt, jeans and well-worn cowboy boots.

Even before he opened his mouth, she knew he wasn't from anywhere around here.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said in a voice that was surprisingly low and soft. The accent, though, was all

"back East." He removed his hat and turned the brim in his fingers, and she got her first good look at him. His face was more lined than she'd originally thought, and his hair was graying at his temples. She realized he was closer to her own age, mid-forties.

His eyes were a haunting pale gray. It reminded her of the wolves that had been reintroduced just over the mountains in Yellowstone Park. The wolves that often killed her sheep.

"I'm Deputy Sheriff Bentley Jamison and I'm looking for Madison Conner," he said, squinting up at her.

"Well, you found her." She saw his surprise and couldn't help smiling to herself. He wasn't the first man who had just assumed the ranch owner was male.

"I'm here about one of your employees," he said. "A neighbor of yours saw a young man come out of the mountains a little while ago.... The man who called thought your employee might have been in trouble."

His words brought back the full force of the unease she'd awakened with last night. "What kind of trouble? I don't know anything about-" She took a step to the edge of the porch stairs then stopped as her gaze slid past him to the faded red barn in need of fresh paint.

Her breath caught as she recognized the lathered-up horse standing next to it. The horse was still saddled, but there was no sign of its rider. Even from the distance she could see that the mare needed tending to at once.

She shoved off the porch steps and sprinted toward the barn. When she got hold of Dewey Putman she'd tan his hide for treating a horse like that. Even as she thought it, though, she

felt that sliver of worry dig in deeper.

What was her tender doing back at the ranch? And what had a neighbor seen that would make him call a deputy instead of her?

Maddie reached the horse, her heart breaking at the shape it was in. The mare had been ridden hard. Her fingers brushed over a four-inch cut along one flank, and she saw that the mare was favoring one leg.

She dug her cell phone from her jeans pocket and tapped in the veterinarian's number, then shoved open the barn door and called Dewey's name.

Behind her, she was only vaguely aware that the sheriff's deputy had followed her. In the dim light of the barn, dust motes twirled in the early-morning light as she called Dewey's name again before the vet came on the line.

"I've got a horse that needs attention right away," she said into the phone. "If you can't come out.." She let out a relieved sigh. "Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it."

As she disconnected, she heard a rustling sound deeper in the barn, then a whimper and what sounded like sobbing. She felt her chest tighten. Stuffing her cell phone back into her jeans pocket, she grabbed up a pitchfork as she followed the sound to a back stall.

A few feet from the muffled noise she felt the deputy's large hand drop to her shoulder. He'd unsnapped his weapon and now motioned for her to stand back and let him handle it.

As a groan came from inside the stall, Maddie gave a shake of her head and banged the stall door open with the pitchfork.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Dewey Putman?" she demanded then froze as she saw her sheep tender cowering in the corner. Her gaze took in his bloodstained clothing, the scratches on his face and the terror in his eyes before he dropped his head into his folded arms again and wept.

"Come out of there, son," the deputy said as he pushed past her.

She let out the breath that had caught in her throat at the sight of Dewey like this and slowly lowered the pitchfork. "You heard him. Come out."

Dewey looked up. A lock of his dark hair had fallen over one bloodshot brown eye. She felt her stomach roil.

"Come on," she said, gentling her voice the way she would have for a spooked horse. She dropped the pitchfork over the partial wall into the next stall and held out her hand.

But before Dewey could take it, the deputy stepped between them.

"I'm going to have to handle this," he said to her then turned to Dewey. "What's your name?"

"His name is Dewey Putman. He's my sheep tender." Then turning to Dewey, she said, "What I need to know is what you're doing here, and where are Branch and my sheep?"

The deputy shot her a look that said he'd prefer to do this his way.

Before she could remind him that he was on her ranch or that she had two thousand sheep and possibly no herder, he said, "Could you please make some tea?"

Bristling, Maddie raised a brow. "Tea? "

"Or coffee if you prefer. Something to warm him up. Also, he'll need a change of clothing. His clothes are soaked. If he isn't suffering from hypothermia, he will be."

Ready to do what came naturally and take care of things herself, she had to bite her tongue as she shot another look at Dewey. He was trembling like a dog cornered by a grizzly and in as bad shape or worse than his horse.

Something had happened in the sheep camp back in the Beartooth Mountains. Even before she'd seen the blood on his clothing, she'd known by the look in the young man's eyes that he was in trouble. The deputy knew it, too.

Dewey was her employee, her responsibility. While her first instinct was to help him, she knew from the warning look the deputy had given her that Dewey's welfare was now out of her hands.

"I'll see to his horse," she said. "There's a pot of coffee on the stove. Help yourself."

Other Books

Hr: The Summer Bride; Pengantin Musim Panas, Daisy Chance hidup mandiri dan memiliki impian besar. Dengan bakat luar biasanya dalam merancang pakaian, tujuan hidup Daisy adalah menjadi seorang pembuat gaun paling terkenal di London. Dia bekerja keras siang dan malam dengan keyakinan bahwa impiannya akan tercapai, sampai suatu saat seorang pria liar dari Irlandia dengan sesumbar mengatakan bahwa cara yang dilakukannya sungguh salah. Patrick Flynn hidup kaya raya dan berambisi tinggi. Dia masuk ke lingkungan Society untuk menemukan calon istri dari kalangan aristokrat. Alih-alih dia merasakan ketertarikan pada seorang gadis keras kepala yang berbicara terlalu blakblakan. Gadis itu pilihan yang salah, tetapi sanggup membuat jantung Flynn berdebar tak keruan.

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