



The Mountain Man's Untamed Bride (Mountain Man Sanctuary #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: What happens when a rebellious city girl crashes into a mountain mans perfectly isolated world? Everything.

SCARLETT:

I had exactly two choices: marry the boring, controlling fiancé my conservative parents picked out, or run. So I did what any self-respecting rebellious daughter would do—I signed up for Mountain Mates and bolted. What I didnt expect was landing with a reclusive mountain man who looks like hed rather wrestle a bear than deal with me. My plan was simple: lose my virginity, become unmarriageable, and finally live on my own terms. But Bodhi is nothing like I imagined. Hes stubborn, infuriating, and somehow sees right through my carefully constructed act.

BODHI:

I never wanted a bride. Hell, I barely want human contact. When my well-meaning buddy signs me up for Mountain Mates, Im ready to shut it down—until Scarlett arrives. Shes not the demure, homemaking woman in the profile. Shes a hurricane in designer heels, turning my quiet mountain life upside down. I should send her back, but something about her wild spirit and desperate determination keeps me from pushing her away. And when a dangerous stalker starts circling, protecting her becomes my only mission.

A high-stakes, laugh-out-loud steamy short romance where a rebellious city girl meets an off-grid mountain man, and unexpected passion ignites in the wilderness.

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“The Uninvited Guest”

Bodhi

I was losing a battle with a deck post that refused to die with dignity when I heard the distinctive rumble of Flint's truck crawling up my driveway. The sound was as welcome as a porcupine in a sleeping bag.

"Son of a—" I slammed the shovel into unyielding earth, my hands vibrating from the impact. Three hours of digging, and this post was still clinging to the ground like it had signed a lease.

Colonel, my prized Barred Rock rooster, cocked his head at the approaching vehicle before launching into a panicked sprint across the yard, his wings flapping with all the grace of a drunk penguin. Roosters are supposedly descended from dinosaurs, but Colonel missed that particular genetic memo.

"Traitor," I muttered as he disappeared around the corner of my cabin. Some watchdog he was turning out to be.

I straightened up, my lower back protesting after hours of manual labor.

At thirty-two, I shouldn't feel this beaten, but that's what happens when you spend most of your days wrestling with nature instead of sitting at a desk.

Living in Promise Ridge, Colorado—"Where Wi-Fi Comes To Die"—meant every luxury came with a price paid in sweat and calluses.

My cabin sat five miles beyond the "Road Maintenance Ends" sign, tucked against the mountainside like a stubborn afterthought.

Most GPS systems pretended this place didn't exist, which was exactly how I preferred it.

After eight years in Army Rangers and two tours I didn't care to remember, solitude wasn't just a preference—it was a necessity.

Flint's truck emerged from the tree line, a rusted blue F-250 that had probably witnessed the fall of Rome.

It bounced over the ruts in my excuse for a driveway, each pothole threatening to shake the vehicle apart.

Watching him approach reminded me of an incoming storm—inevitable and likely to leave damage in its wake.

The last time he'd shown up unannounced, I'd ended up with a goat. I did not need another goat.

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying," I called out as the truck groaned to a stop, belching a cloud of dust that would make a coal mine jealous.

Flint killed the engine and hopped out with the energy of a man half his age.

For someone pushing forty, he moved like he was fueled by pure caffeine and bad ideas.

His full beard had more ginger in it than a Christmas cookie, and his perpetual smile was the exact expression worn by men about to do something tremendously stupid.

"That's a hell of a greeting for your only friend," he said, slamming the truck door with unnecessary force. Colonel squawked indignantly from his hiding place behind the woodpile.

"My only friend would know I don't like surprise visits," I shot back, driving the shovel into the ground where it stood at attention like an exhausted soldier.

"If I waited for an invitation, I'd die of old age." Flint clapped his hands together, surveying my partially demolished deck. "Making improvements to the bachelor palace?"

"Trying to. This post is being stubborn."

"Must recognize a kindred spirit," he quipped. "Need a hand?"

I grunted noncommittally, which Flint correctly interpreted as a yes. Together, we attacked the post from both sides, digging around its base until we could rock it loose. With a final heave that threatened to rearrange my vertebrae, the post surrendered and toppled over.

"Victory," Flint declared, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Now, got any of that homebrew? Josie only lets me have beer on weekends at home."

And there it was. The real reason for the visit.

"It's barely noon," I pointed out.

"It's five o'clock in Japan," he countered, "and what Josie don't know won't result in me sleeping on the couch."

I rolled my eyes but led him toward the cabin.

Flint had been with Josie since kindergarten—literally.

The story went that after he'd kissed her during recess, she'd slugged him first and then informed that now that he'd claimed her, they had to get married someday.

Thirty-odd years later, she was still calling the shots in their relationship, running their outfitting store with the efficiency of a seasoned CEO while Flint charmed the customers.

Six kids and counting hadn't dimmed their ridiculous devotion to each other, and from what I could tell, they were on a personal mission to single-handedly repopulate Promise Ridge.

As we crossed the yard, I had a sudden flash of memory—Flint's visit last week. The one where he'd cornered me at Mabel's general store, the one I'd been trying to forget.

The one that was about to become impossible to ignore.

"Bodhi? That you in there?" Flint's voice had carried easily through the thin wooden door of the outhouse behind Mabel's General Store.

I'd frozen mid-business, wondering if silence would make him go away. It did not.

"I can see your boots under the door, man. Those ridiculous steel-toed monsters would survive a nuclear blast."

"I'm busy," I'd growled. "Some privacy would be nice."

"Perfect timing, actually. Got something for you to read while you're... occupied."

Before I could protest, several sheets of paper had slid under the door, narrowly avoiding the questionable puddle that always seemed to be present no matter how well-aimed a person tried to be.

"What the hell is this?" I'd demanded, reluctantly picking up the papers.

"Application forms," Flint had answered cheerfully. "For Mountain Mates. The mail-order bride service."

I'd nearly fallen off the seat. "The WHAT?"

"Been in there long enough to read the registration forms," Flint had chuckled. "Might as well sign!"

I'd skimmed the papers in horrified fascination. Mountain Mates: Connecting Lonely Mountain Men with Women Seeking a Simpler Life. Complete with testimonials from supposedly happy couples who'd found love through arranged matrimony.

"Have you lost your mind?" I'd hissed through the door. "I'm not signing up for a mail-order bride!"

"Already did it for you, buddy. Just need your final approval on the form." Flint's voice had been entirely too pleased with himself. "That guy at Skyline Bar over in Hope Peak, Montana found his wife this way—the Mountain Mates site works!"

"You did WHAT?" I'd been so shocked I'd forgotten to keep my voice down.

"Check the second page. Your profile's all set up."

With mounting dread, I'd flipped to the second page.

Name: Bodhi Wilder Age: 32 Occupation: Skilled craftsman/woodworker Interests: Nature, sustainable living, animals, quiet evenings by the fire Seeking: Traditional woman who appreciates simple living, home cooking, and rural values

"What the actual fuck, Flint?" I'd emerged from the outhouse clutching the crumpled papers, my shopping forgotten.

Flint had been leaning against the wall, looking like the cat that ate the canary. "Just some light embellishment. I didn't mention that time you chased the mailman with an axe. It was Halloween, but still."

"That was ONE TIME, and he shouldn't have been on my property without warning," I'd defended myself. "And I'm not a 'skilled craftsman.' I build things so they don't fall apart, not for art."

"Potato, po-tah-to." Flint had waved dismissively. "Look, you're turning into a mountain troll. When was the last time you had a conversation with someone who wasn't me, Mabel, or one of your birds?"

I'd glared at him. "I like my chickens. They don't talk back or sign me up for matrimony."

"You need someone in your life, Bodhi. You can't spend the rest of your days talking to Colonel about the weather."

"Watch me."

"Josie agrees with me, by the way," he'd added smugly. "She says it's unnatural for a man your age to be so alone. Says it's not healthy."

"Tell your wife to mind her own business. I don't need her matchmaking any more

than I need yours."

"Too late." Flint had grinned. "She helped me fill out your profile. Said to emphasize your 'rugged capability' and downplay the 'grumpy hermit' vibe."

Now, back in my cabin, Flint settled into the ancient armchair that served as my primary furniture in what generously could be called a living room. The chair creaked ominously under his weight.

"You're going to fix that when it finally gives up," I warned him, retrieving two mason jars from the kitchen and filling them with amber liquid from a growler in my fridge.

"So," Flint said, accepting the homebrew with a nod of thanks. "About your bride—"

"There is no bride," I interrupted. "I never confirmed anything."

"Funny thing about that..." Flint took a long sip, obviously stalling. "You know how the form had that little clause at the bottom? The one about automatic confirmation if no objection was received within seven days?"

My stomach dropped like a stone in a deep well. "You didn't."

"I did mention it to you," he defended. "Last Tuesday, remember? When you were replacing that window?"

I vaguely recalled him shouting something from the ground while I'd balanced on a ladder fifteen feet up, focused on not falling to my death. "While I was working on a two-story drop? That's your idea of informed consent?"

"The point is," Flint continued, entirely unrepentant, "your seven days are up, and she's been matched."

"She? There's an actual woman in this scenario?" The concept seemed absurd. What kind of woman signed up to marry a stranger in the middle of nowhere?

"Scarlett Montgomery. Twenty-four. From Atlanta." Flint pulled his phone from his pocket, tapped a few times, and held it out to me. "See for yourself."

I scowled before reluctantly taking the phone. The screen showed a photo of a young woman with hair the color of autumn leaves and a smile that looked like it belonged in a toothpaste commercial. She was pretty in a wholesome, girl-next-door way that made me immediately suspicious.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

"Says here she loves cooking, cleaning, and keeping house," Flint continued. "She's sweet, quiet, loves animals and children. Wants a big family someday. Profile mentions she has 'good Christian values' too."

"Which probably means she's a virgin," he added with a knowing wink. "From a good family, by the looks of it."

I handed the phone back, skepticism rising. "And she wants to marry some random mountain hermit she's never met? What's wrong with her?"

"Maybe she wants the simple life. Some women do, you know. Josie could've gone to Denver, worked for her uncle's accounting firm. Instead, she chose to run a shop in a town with more dogs than people because she loves it here."

"Josie's a native," I pointed out. "She was born two miles from your store. This girl is from Atlanta. You know, a city with actual infrastructure and functioning electricity."

"Maybe she's not running. Maybe she's just... looking for something different."

"Different from what? Indoor plumbing and electricity that works consistently?" I shook my head. "This has to be some kind of scam."

"Well, you can ask her yourself. Tomorrow."

I choked on my homebrew. "Tomorrow? TOMORROW? What the hell, Flint?"

"She's driving up from Georgia. Should be here around noon." Flint's expression

brightened with mischievous delight. "Surprise!"

"I haven't even cleared out the spare room!" The words burst out before I could stop them.

Flint stared at me. "What's wrong with the spare room?"

"There might still be evidence of the raccoon tenants who were living there until recently." I ran a hand through my hair, mind racing. "This isn't happening. Call her. Cancel it."

"Can't. She's already on the road, and these mountain passes don't exactly have reliable cell service." Flint leaned forward. "Look, just meet her. If you absolutely hate each other, I'll help sort it out. But give it a chance, Bodhi. You've been alone too long."

I paced the small confines of my cabin, feeling like a trapped animal. "This isn't the 1800s. Normal people don't order spouses through the mail!"

"You're not normal people," Flint pointed out. "You live five miles past where civilization ends, talk to birds, and haven't had a haircut from someone other than yourself in what, three years?"

"Two," I corrected automatically. "Mabel did it when I got that sap stuck in it."

"My point exactly." He tapped his wedding ring. "Some of us got lucky and found the right person in our youth. The rest of you need a little help. Josie says all that's missing from your life is someone to share it with."

"Josie also said my cabin looked like a serial killer's workshop."

"Only the shed," Flint corrected with a grin. "She said the cabin just needed a woman's touch."

I collapsed onto the couch, sending up a cloud of dust that was probably half dog hair, despite the fact that I didn't own a dog. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it." Flint finished his drink and stood. "Now, let's get this place ready for a lady. Where's your vacuum?"

I stared at him as if he'd just asked me where I parked my spaceship.

"Vacuum?" I repeated, the word sounding foreign in my mouth. "You think I own a vacuum cleaner? Out here? What would I power it with—optimism?"

"Broom?" he tried again, visibly recalibrating his expectations.

I pointed to the corner where a worn broom leaned like a neglected sentry.

"Right." Flint rolled up his sleeves. "This is going to take some work. Josie sent cleaning supplies, by the way. And food. She says your bride shouldn't have to eat squirrel on her first night here."

"I don't eat squirrel," I protested.

"Only because you're a terrible shot."

Four hours later, my cabin looked marginally less like a disaster zone.

We'd swept, dusted, and removed at least three previously undiscovered spider

metropolises.

I'd changed the sheets in the spare room and confirmed that its previous woodland occupants had indeed relocated, though they'd left behind enough evidence to suggest they'd considered applying for permanent residency.

Flint had departed with promises to return tomorrow to "witness the magic," leaving me alone with my thoughts, a house that reeked of pine-scented cleaner, and a casserole dish from Josie with detailed reheating instructions taped to the lid.

"This is insane," I told Colonel, who had reclaimed his perch on the porch railing now that the threat of Flint had passed. "I'm not husband material. I don't even like people."

Colonel clucked, tilting his head in what could only be judgment.

I surveyed my kingdom—ten acres of remote Colorado wilderness, a cabin I'd built with my own hands, and a life carefully constructed to keep the world at arm's length.

Tomorrow, a stranger would invade this sanctuary.

A woman who claimed to want the simple life but probably had no idea what she was actually about to find.

The sun began its descent behind the mountains, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink that no photograph could ever capture.

On any other evening, I'd have sat on the porch with a beer, soaking in the quiet and the beauty.

Tonight, I found myself arranging firewood into a neater pile and wondering if my

spare towels still qualified as fabric rather than abstract fiber art.

As darkness fell, I stood on my porch, watching the first stars appear. The only sounds were the rustling leaves and the occasional hoot of an owl. Tomorrow, this peace would be shattered by a stranger who thought she wanted to be a mountain wife.

The same instinct that had kept me alive through two tours in Afghanistan now thrummed a warning beneath my skin.

My carefully constructed world was about to change, and I was powerless to stop it.

Tomorrow, Scarlett Montgomery would arrive with her sweet smile and traditional values, and nothing would be the same again.

Something told me she had no idea what she was getting herself into. But then again, neither did I.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Desperate Times, Mountain Measures”

Scarlett

My poor BMW wasn't built for this.

I winced as my car scraped over another rock, the chassis groaning in protest. This wasn't a road—it was a boulder collection someone had forgotten to clear. Behind me, my designer luggage slid ominously across the trunk with each bump and dip.

"Almost there," I muttered, squinting at the darkened GPS screen. It had surrendered twenty minutes ago, leaving me with nothing but the vague directions from a gas station attendant who'd looked at me like I was an alien when I'd asked about Promise Ridge.

I cranked up my playlist to drown out the concerning noises from beneath my car.

My favorite rapper's explicit lyrics filled the space, detailing exactly what she'd do to any man who tried to control her life.

I grinned, picturing my father's face. Reverend Elijah "Hellfire" Montgomery would surely burst a blood vessel if he could see his precious daughter now.

The car hit a pothole deep enough to qualify as a small canyon. My head nearly smacked the roof, and I heard the sickening crack of a nail breaking.

"Seriously?" I glanced down to see my freshly done gel manicure ruined, the red

extension on my index finger snapped clean off. It had been my small rebellion—blood red with little handcuff designs that would make Daddy need smelling salts during Sunday service.

One broken nail, however, was nothing compared to the broken life waiting for me if I'd stayed back in Atlanta. That dinner was the final scene in my good-daughter performance—the moment I decided to tear up the script and write my own damn story.

The restaurant had been Daddy's choice, of course—an overpriced steakhouse where the men who funded his megachurch made deals over bourbon while their wives discussed charity galas and pretended not to notice the waitresses' ages.

I'd worn my most modest dress, which still earned a disapproving glance from Mother when the fabric dared to suggest I had a figure underneath.

"Scarlett, darling," Langley Richardson announced, sliding into the seat beside me. His teeth gleamed unnaturally white beneath the crystal chandeliers. "You look lovely. Almost perfect."

The "almost" hung between us like a threat.

Daddy beamed across the table, his expression practically screaming how fortunate I was to have caught the attention of the Richardson family's heir. Mother nodded along, her smile frozen in place as always, eyes darting to nearby tables to ensure we were being properly observed by Atlanta's social elite.

As my parents discussed wine with the waiter, Langley leaned close, his cologne not quite masking the scent of expensive scotch on his breath despite the early hour.

"I've already picked out the modest clothing catalog I've approved for you," he whispered, his hand finding my knee under the crisp white tablecloth.

"As my wife, you'll need to present yourself appropriately—in public, that is.

No more of these..." his eyes dropped to my chest, "distractions.

Those assets are for my private appreciation only. "

His phone buzzed and he checked it, smirking slightly before sliding it face-down on the table.

The same smirk I'd seen in that photo Melissa had shown me from his last "business trip" to Vegas—the one with the blurred-out women my father had dismissed as "manipulated images from jealous troublemakers. "

The way he squeezed my thigh under the table, just a little too high, a little too hard, told me everything his carefully curated Sunday persona tried to hide.

I maintained my smile even as something inside me shriveled. In that moment, staring at my untouched lobster bisque, I knew I would rather live in a cardboard box than marry this man who saw me as nothing but another acquisition for his collection.

The memory dissolved as my car bounced over another rock. At least I'd had the presence of mind to empty my bank account before leaving—the one my grandmother had set up that my parents couldn't access. It wasn't much, but it would buy me time to figure out my next steps.

Promise Ridge, Colorado. Population: probably fewer than my father's Sunday

congregation.

I'd found Mountain Mates during a desperate late-night search for escape routes. The website looked like it hadn't been updated since dial-up was cutting edge, complete with pixelated photos of bearded men staring soulfully beside pine trees.

The questionnaire had made me laugh out loud.

What qualities do you bring to a traditional marriage? it had asked.

I took a sip of wine and typed with a sly grin: "I absolutely love cooking, cleaning, and submitting to male authority. I've never had an independent thought, and my hobbies include staring adoringly and nodding."

I'd crafted exactly the kind of fantasy woman I imagined these overgrown male hillbillies would want—the complete opposite of who I actually was.

For the "About Me" section, I laid it on even thicker:

I'm a meek, quiet girl from a good family. I love animals, children, and hope to have a big family someday. I have old-fashioned values and believe a woman's place is in the home. I can't wait to keep house for the right mountain man!

I attached a photo from my church's youth ministry page—me with minimal makeup, hair pulled back, wearing a demure blue dress with a practiced Sunday smile.

The same smile that had won me Miss Teen Atlanta three years ago, despite dropping my flaming baton twice during the talent portion.

My pageant days had ended when I'd suggested that perhaps world peace wasn't achievable through better swimwear, but Daddy still had the tiara displayed in his

office to impress church donors.

Perfect bait for mountain men seeking a submissive bride—they'd never suspect that behind that angelic smile lurked a woman who'd been kicked out of finishing school for teaching the other girls how to pick locks with hairpins.

The confirmation email had arrived within hours, featuring a picture of one Bodhi Wilder from Promise Ridge.

The man looked like he ate pinecones for breakfast—wild brown hair, intense eyes, and a beard that could hide small woodland creatures.

But his location was perfect—remote enough that no one would think to look for me there.

So I'd packed my car under cover of darkness, left a vague note about "finding myself," and hit the road before dawn.

Now, after a day and a half of marathon driving fueled by gas station coffee and determination, I was beginning to question my sanity.

The trees finally thinned, revealing a clearing with what I assumed was my destination. I'd been picturing something from those mountain retreat renovation shows—rustic-luxe with exposed beams, a stone fireplace, and tastefully arranged antlers on the walls.

What I saw instead was a structure that looked like it had been built by someone who'd learned about houses from a child's drawing.

Solid, definitely, but lacking any hint of decorative intent.

This place was built to withstand the apocalypse, but unfortunately not to host an Instagram photoshoot anytime soon.

And there, on the porch, stood the man himself.

I caught my breath.

Bodhi Wilder looked like he'd walked straight out of a wilderness survival guide. He was taller than his photo suggested, with shoulders broad from actual labor rather than gym sessions. His shirt had the sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms mapped with veins and sinew.

His beard was as untamed as promised, framing a mouth currently set in a thin, unimpressed line. His eyes—a warm brown that might have been inviting if they weren't narrowed suspiciously—tracked my car like I was an invading army.

I pulled to a stop and killed the engine. In the sudden silence, my heartbeat seemed unnaturally loud.

So this is the mountain man mistake I'm about to make. At least he's nice to look at.

I checked my reflection, quickly refreshing my forbidden red lipstick. I smoothed my deliberately tight white top, adjusted my girls to reveal a good helping of cleavage, and opened the car door.

My designer boots sank instantly into mud.

"You cannot be serious," I muttered, trying to extract my foot without leaving the boot behind. By the time I stood upright, Bodhi had descended from the porch and was watching me with an expression that mixed disbelief and confusion.

"Hi there!" I called with my best pageant smile, the one that had won me "Most Photogenic" despite my coach's fear it made me look too 'aggressively approachable.' "Bodhi Wilder?"

I'm Scarlett. Your... bride, I guess?" I fanned myself dramatically, feeling sweat trickle down my back in the thick summer heat.

"Will you be a dear and grab my bags? And please tell me there's central air or at least a pool somewhere! "

His expression shifted to unmistakable alarm. He looked like I'd announced I was here to audit his taxes rather than become his wife.

"What happened to your car?" he finally asked, gesturing to my mud-splattered BMW.

"Your driveway happened," I replied, still smiling. "I think I left my suspension somewhere back there."

He stared, his gaze traveling from my face to my tight jeans to the stack of luggage visible through the car windows.

"You're Scarlett?" he questioned, sounding like he hoped he was hallucinating.

"In the flesh." I wobbled slightly in the mud. "All yours, courtesy of Mountain Mates."

His jaw tightened. "There's been a mistake."

"Wouldn't be the first one I've made." I sighed. "But here I am, and here you are, and somewhere back there—" I waved toward the winding road "—is civilization, which

I've officially left behind. Maybe we could continue this inside? I could really use a nice chilled white wine after that drive."

A chicken strutted purposefully around the corner of the cabin, its feathers ruffled importantly as if on official business. It stopped at Bodhi's feet and fixed me with a suspicious stare.

"Who's your feathered friend?" I asked, eyeing the bird that was sizing me up like I was on the menu.

"Colonel," Bodhi answered flatly. "He doesn't like strangers."

"Great. Even the chicken doesn't like me."

"Rooster," he corrected with the hint of a smirk. "City girl."

Bodhi ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up even more. "Look, Miss Montgomery—"

"Scarlett," I corrected. "If we're going to argue about why I'm here, we might as well be on a first-name basis."

"We are not getting married," he stated firmly. "My friend signed me up without permission."

I blinked at him as his words sank in. "You didn't want a mail-order bride?"

"No," he declared, crossing his arms. "I don't want a wife, mail-order or otherwise."

"Oh." The syllable hung between us awkwardly.

I glanced back at my car, then at the endless forest surrounding us. My carefully crafted escape plan was unraveling faster than cheap pantyhose. I had nowhere to go. No way to face my parents or Langley after my dramatic exit.

So I improvised.

"That's unfortunate," I said, injecting brightness into my voice.

"Because I've already told everyone I'm married.

Changed my social media status. My parents threw me a going-away party.

The church is planning a welcome-back reception in six weeks.

"I delivered the lies with practiced conviction, knowing they'd create exactly the kind of social obligation that would make a decent man feel trapped.

None of this was true, but he had no way of knowing that.

His face paled beneath his tan. "You what?"

"I'll just grab my smallest bag for now," I continued, turning back to the car. "Don't worry, I'm a good roommate. You'll barely notice I'm here. Except when I'm cooking or..." I winked. "Being wifely."

The chicken made a sound suspiciously like a snort.

"This isn't happening," Bodhi muttered, more to himself than to me.

I pulled my carry-on from the trunk, its wheels immediately sinking into the mud. "Oh, it's happening, mountain man. Consider it cosmic justice for having friends with

internet access."

As I dragged my luggage toward what was apparently now my temporary home, I heard him exhale deeply behind me. It was the sound of a man who'd realized there was no way out—a feeling I understood all too well.

I'd escaped one unwanted marriage only to force myself into another. The difference was, this arrangement would be on my terms, for my purposes.

And judging by the way Bodhi Wilder's eyes had darkened when they first swept over me, my plan to shed my inconvenient virginity might not be as challenging as I'd feared. One look at those capable hands told me he'd be perfect for the job—if I could just convince him to cooperate.

I squared my shoulders and marched toward the cabin, leaving perfect boot prints in the mud. Operation Mountain Man Seduction had officially begun.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing”

Bodhi

"What the hell?" I stared at the woman standing in my mud pit of a front yard, sweat already beading on my forehead in the July heat.

Same face as the profile photo. Same red hair. But everything else? Complete bullshit.

Flint's "sweet, wholesome girl with good values" was nothing like the profile photo.

Tight white top that made my body instantly react in ways that weren't appropriate for a first meeting.

Designer jeans that probably cost more than my monthly expenses.

Long nails and lips painted the color of warning signs.

This wasn't the meek church girl from the profile—this was a city woman who'd wandered far from her natural habitat.

"Problem?" She cocked her hip, those red lips curving into something that wasn't remotely close to the shy smile Flint had shown me. "You gonna help with these bags or just stand there looking shell-shocked?"

Colonel burst from behind the woodpile and flapped across the yard with all the grace

of a drunk penguin, squawking like I'd just invited a fox into the henhouse. For once, the paranoid bastard was right on target.

"There's been a mistake," I said, my jaw clenched like I was back in Ranger training, enduring a dressing down from a drill sergeant.

"You said that already." She sighed, inspecting a broken nail as sweat dampened tendrils of red hair at her temples.

"Look, I've driven cross-country in a car that wasn't built for your apocalypse-prepper driveway.

I'm melting in this heat, I'm starving, and I've broken a two-hundred-dollar manicure.

Can we at least go inside before you toss me back to civilization? "

The tactical part of my brain—the part that had kept me alive in Kandahar—calculated rapidly. Sunset in forty minutes. Mountain roads too dangerous for a city driver after dark. Nearest motel ninety minutes away, minimum.

"One night," I growled, grabbing her designer suitcase. It weighed more than my rucksack had in the Rangers, and I'd carried everything I needed to survive for weeks in that. "We straighten this out tomorrow."

"Such a gentleman." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

I stomped toward the cabin, grateful for my loose carpenter pants. Eight months, three weeks, and two days. That's how long since I'd last been with a woman. Not that I was counting. My body, however, was silently reminding me of every day of that drought.

Colonel scurried after us, his head bobbing with agitation, beady eyes fixed on Scarlett's boots like he was plotting their violent demise.

"Home sweet home," I muttered, shouldering open the door that still smelled faintly of the pine-scented cleaner Flint had brought yesterday. Without his help, the place would've looked even worse. Not that I gave a damn what this woman thought of my living situation.

Scarlett stepped inside and froze, her expression shifting from expectation to horror so fast I almost laughed. She surveyed my living space like an officer inspecting a particularly disappointing barracks.

"This is..." She hesitated, obviously searching for a polite word.

"Functional," I supplied.

"I was going to say 'primitive.'" She wandered further in, stiletto boots clicking against the wooden floor I'd installed with my own two hands. "Where's the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?"

"The cabin." She gestured around as if expecting hidden rooms to materialize. "The stone fireplace? The vaulted ceilings? The hot tub overlooking the mountains?"

I snorted. "You've been watching too much HGTV."

"Clearly not enough." She set her purse—something with initials on it that probably cost more than my truck—on my hand-built coffee table. "No hot tub at all? Seriously?"

"No hot tub. No vaulted ceilings. No stone fireplace." I dropped her suitcase with a thud that made Colonel jump. "This isn't a resort. It's where I live."

She ran a finger along my bookshelf, checking for dust. Thanks to Flint's cleaning frenzy, she found none. "Fascinating collection. Military history, survival guides, and..." She pulled out a dog-eared paperback. "Jane Austen?"

I snatched the book from her hand. "Belonged to my grandmother."

That was a lie. I'd bought it at a used bookstore in Promise Ridge. I'd sooner admit to handling live explosives blindfolded than confess I enjoyed nineteenth-century literature.

"Tour?" I said gruffly, desperate to move things along.

She followed me through the cabin, her perfume making it hard to focus, like trying to navigate with a faulty compass. I kept my eyes forward, avoiding the view that was proving more distracting than it should.

"Kitchen." I gestured to the open area with my hand-built cabinets—the one thing I'd actually taken time to craft properly. "Stove runs on propane. Fridge on solar."

"Charming," she said, in a tone that suggested it was anything but. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, smudging her makeup slightly. "Is everything in here powered by prayer and wishful thinking?"

"Solar panels." I tapped the energy monitor on the wall. "Enough power for necessities. Not enough for hair dryers and air conditioning."

"It must be ninety degrees in here," she complained, fanning herself with a magazine she'd pulled from her purse.

"Eighty-four," I corrected, glancing at the thermometer mounted by the back door. "Windows open at night, closed during the day. Mountain way of beating the heat."

She rolled her eyes so hard I thought she might strain something.

"Bathroom's here," I continued, pushing open the door to the small space that had taken me three months to get right. The shower drain had been a particular nightmare. "Scared off most of the spiders this morning."

Her head snapped toward me. "Most?"

"Can't get 'em all." I couldn't help the small twitch at the corner of my mouth. "The bigger ones usually stay in the rafters, though. Unless they're hungry."

She went pale beneath her makeup. Good. Maybe fear of arachnids would send her packing faster than my charming personality.

"Hot water?" she asked weakly, peering into the shower like she expected to find a tarantula tea party.

"When the solar's charged, you'll have plenty of hot water," I said, gesturing to the copper pipes visible through the small window. "One advantage of all this summer sunshine."

"Small blessings," she said with relief.

"And here," I said, moving to the final door, "is where you'll sleep."

I pushed open the door to the spare room that, until yesterday's emergency eviction, had housed a family of raccoons. Flint had helped me clear out the nest and scrub the place down, but there was no masking the lingering scent of wild animals or the

scratch marks on the windowsill.

Scarlett's nose wrinkled instantly. "What's that smell?"

"Previous tenants," I said flatly. "They checked out yesterday."

"People?"

"Technically mammals."

She stepped inside cautiously, taking in the simple bed with its army-surplus blanket, the three-legged dresser I'd propped up with a chunk of firewood, and the small window that looked out into darkness. "There's no closet."

"Hook on the back of the door."

"One hook?"

"How many do you need? It's one night."

She looked at her massive suitcase, then back at me with an expression that suggested I'd just told her we'd be dining on grubs and twigs.

My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since the jerky I'd had for lunch while fighting with that damn deck post—a project now on indefinite hold thanks to my unexpected visitor.

"Hungry?" I asked, already turning toward the kitchen.

"Starving." Her tone softened slightly, the first genuine reaction I'd seen from her. "I haven't eaten since some questionable gas station burrito six hours ago."

"Hope you're not picky."

I considered the casserole dish Josie had sent over yesterday—the one with detailed reheating instructions taped to the lid—but decided against it. Too much effort. The mac and cheese would have to do.

While the pasta cooked, I grabbed two mason jars from the cabinet and filled them with the home-brewed beer I kept in my fridge. The cold drink would be welcome in this heat. After yesterday's cleaning session and now this unexpected guest, I'd earned it.

I set a jar in front of her. "No wine."

She eyed the cloudy amber liquid suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Local beer. My friend makes it—guy who got me into this mess in the first place."

She took a cautious sip, then a longer one. "Not bad. Stronger than I expected."

"Everything about Promise Ridge is."

I dished up the neon pasta onto two mismatched plates—one with a faded Christmas pattern I'd found at Mabel's General Store, the other plain white ceramic. Not exactly the fine dining she was probably used to, but it was calories.

"My specialty," I said dryly, sliding her plate across the table. "Mac and cheese à la box."

She poked at it with her fork. "Is this... organic at least?"

I barked out a laugh. "It cost a dollar and glows in the dark. So no, definitely not

organic unless you count the chemicals as living organisms."

She took a tentative bite, then seemed surprised. "This isn't awful."

"Ringing endorsement." I shoveled a forkful into my own mouth. "Should put that on my dating profile. 'Bodhi Wilder: His cooking isn't awful.'"

That got a smile from her—a real one that made something in my chest shift uncomfortably.

We ate in silence punctuated by Colonel's occasional outraged squawks from outside.

I'd banished him after he'd spent five solid minutes following Scarlett around the kitchen, puffing his feathers, and strutting in circles whenever she moved, like a feathered security guard convinced she was planning a heist.

"So," she said finally, pushing her empty plate away. "I'm not exactly what you expected."

"You're exactly what I didn't expect," I corrected. "Your profile was bullshit."

She didn't even pretend to look ashamed. "So was yours. Skilled craftsman? Quiet evenings by the fire? You neglected to mention the spider sanctuary and raccoon timeshare program."

I leaned back in my chair, studying her. The way she held herself—confident but with something underneath, like a soldier hiding an injury. I needed to understand what was really going on here.

"Why make a fake profile to end up in the middle of nowhere with a stranger?"

Something flashed across her face—something real and raw before the confidence slipped back into place. "Maybe I needed to disappear for a while."

"Running from something?"

"Aren't we all?" She twirled a strand of red hair around her finger, the movement drawing my attention momentarily. "Atlanta to nowhere just seemed like a good escape route."

"That's not an escape. It's a breakdown."

To my surprise, she laughed—a genuine sound that didn't match her carefully constructed image. "You might be right about that."

I stood to clear the plates, needing distance from her perfume and the way her laugh made me less annoyed than I wanted to be. "Got popsicles for dessert. They were on sale."

"My hero," she said, but the sarcasm had softened.

The temperature had finally started to drop as the evening wore on. With dessert finished and dishes cleared, there wasn't much left to delay the inevitable.

Later, after showing her how the shower's temperamental valve worked ("Full left for hot, don't touch the middle setting unless you enjoy ice baths") and pointing out the battery-powered fan I kept for the hottest nights, I retreated to my bedroom, the only space still free from the invasion.

I checked my phone, surprised to see no messages from Flint. The bastard had promised to return today to "witness the magic" of Scarlett's arrival. Typical. Set off the landmine, then disappear before the explosion. When I got my hands on him

tomorrow...

I lay on my bed, stripped down to boxer shorts against the lingering heat, uncomfortably aware of my body's reaction to having an attractive woman under my roof.

Through the open window came the drone of cicadas and the distant howl of a coyote.

Summer nights in the mountains—normally my favorite time.

Now ruined by the sounds of an intruder: water pipes groaning, floorboards creaking, and the occasional soft sigh that made my imagination run places it had no business going.

Just as I was drifting into uneasy sleep, her voice cut through the thin walls, sharp and horrified:

"No service? At all? Like, NONE? What the hell, is this even America?"

I jammed my pillow over my head, a technique I'd perfected in barracks with twenty other Rangers. Didn't work any better now than it had then.

Tomorrow, I'd figure out how to send this woman back to whatever she was running from.

Tomorrow, I'd reclaim my territory. Tomorrow, I'd get back to work on that deck post and forget about the way her body moved when she laughed or how gracefully she carried herself despite being completely out of her element.

And tomorrow, I'd have a very pointed conversation with Flint about his absence

today.

Colonel crowed once from his roost, the feathered equivalent of "I told you so."

"Shut up," I muttered into the darkness.

But the rooster was right. I was screwed.

And not in the way that kept me awake, staring at the ceiling, acutely aware she was sleeping just one thin wall away.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Operation Deflower Me Now”

Scarlett

Something was staring at me.

I blinked awake, my body registering several complaints at once: the too-firm mattress beneath me, the scratchy army-surplus blanket against my skin, and the lingering scent of what I could only assume was Eau de Raccoon Family.

After a restless night of tossing and turning—partly due to the unfamiliar bed and partly due to the maddening knowledge that Bodhi slept just one thin wall away—I felt about as refreshed as week-old lettuce.

And there, framed perfectly in the small window, was Colonel—Bodhi's demon chicken—watching me with beady eyes that judged my life choices more effectively than my mother ever could.

"Seriously?" I muttered, sitting up and running a hand through my tangled hair. "Poultry paparazzi. That's a new one."

Colonel tilted his head, his feathers puffing slightly as if offended by my existence. The morning light backlit him like some feathered harbinger of doom.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," I told him, only to have him peck once at the window in what felt distinctly like a threat.

I checked my phone out of habit—still no service, still no escape route digitally available.

At least the basic functions like my Notes app still worked offline.

Small mercies. My reflection in the screen made me wince.

Without my usual array of products, my hair had decided to channel "electrocution victim" rather than "tousled bedhead goddess. "

The cabin was quiet except for the occasional creak of the ancient structure settling.

No sign of my reluctant host. I slipped out of bed, pulled on the silk robe I'd packed (because even when fleeing an arranged marriage, a girl has standards), and padded to the window.

The morning air seeped through the thin glass, carrying the crisp scent of pine and something earthy that never existed in Atlanta's perfumed suburbs.

That's when I saw him.

Bodhi stood in the clearing beside a massive pile of logs, swinging an axe with the casual precision of someone who'd done it ten thousand times.

His shirt—apparently an optional garment in the wilderness—was draped over a nearby stump, leaving nothing but acres of tanned skin and muscle on full display.

Sweet baby Jesus on a pogo stick.

I pressed my hand against the cool glass, suddenly very aware of my heartbeat.

Bodhi's body moved with fluid grace, the muscles in his back rippling as he brought the axe down in a perfect arc, splitting a log clean in two.

Sweat glistened on his shoulders, highlighting every defined plane of his torso.

His arms—dear lord, those arms—flexed with each movement, veins visible beneath tanned skin that had clearly never seen the inside of a tanning bed.

"Good lord," I whispered, "it's like someone took a Greek statue and just... added more muscles."

I'd dated prep school boys with expensive gym memberships and personal trainers who hadn't achieved half of what Bodhi's body displayed.

This wasn't sculpted vanity muscle—this was functional strength, carved by actual physical labor rather than carefully programmed workouts.

My mind wandered dangerously into territory I'd only experienced through romance novels and late-night internet searches.

What would sex with him be like? I'd never done it—a fact that would have my father hosting a celebratory church service if he knew with certainty—but if I had to choose someone to change that status, which I absolutely did and had. ..

Well. Mountain Man was making a compelling visual argument for himself.

How big was his...? I felt my cheeks flame at the thought. The correlation between height and other measurements was supposedly a myth, but at 6'3" with hands that could probably span my entire waist...

I needed a distraction before I combusted on the spot.

Turning from the window with reluctance, I surveyed the room in daylight. My Louis Vuitton luggage—which Bodhi must have brought in while I was showering last night—looked absurdly out of place against the rough-hewn walls, like a Prada bag at a tractor pull.

I'd come here with a plan—admittedly a half-baked one formulated during a wine-fueled panic—but a plan nonetheless.

Step one: escape Atlanta and my impending matrimonial doom.

Step two: find a man my father would hate.

Step three: lose my inconvenient virginity, thereby rendering myself "damaged goods" in the eyes of Langley and his biblical fixation on purity.

Bodhi Wilder, with his wilderness hermit aesthetic and complete disdain for social niceties, was perfect for steps two and three. Now I just needed to convince him to cooperate.

I pulled out my phone and opened my notes app, creating a new list titled "Operation: Deflower Me Now.

"I'd always been a planner—it was how I'd survived eighteen years of Bible camp without committing any of the sins I was constantly warned against. Plus, I'd always had a knack for naming my schemes—from "Operation Sunday School Escape" at age eight to "Mission: Prom Night Freedom" at seventeen.

"Step 1," I typed, "Breakfast seduction wearing only an apron and a thong."

It was a classic for a reason. Men liked food, and men liked women wearing almost nothing. Combine the two, and surely even the most stoic mountain man would cave

to basic biology.

I rummaged through my suitcase, finding the black lace thong I'd packed specifically for emergency seduction scenarios. What constituted an "emergency seduction scenario" had been unclear when I packed it, but fleeing an arranged marriage to seduce a mountain man certainly qualified.

The apron part was trickier. I tiptoed into the kitchen, finding a utilitarian canvas apron hanging on a hook by the ancient stove. It was frayed at the edges and stained with what I hoped was just food, but it would have to do.

I changed quickly, examining my reflection in the small mirror hanging in the bathroom.

The effect was less "domestic goddess" and more "confused stripper at a farm-themed party," but it would have to do.

The apron covered my front adequately but left my back and the curves of my backside largely exposed, save for the thin black lace strip of the thong.

The kitchen was a challenge in itself. I'd never actually cooked anything more complicated than microwave popcorn.

Back home, we had a housekeeper who handled all that, and my college years had been a blur of meal plans and takeout.

But how hard could it be? Eggs, bacon, maybe some toast?

People made breakfast every day without burning their houses down.

I located a cast iron pan that weighed approximately as much as a small child and set

it on the stove.

The ancient appliance had actual knobs instead of digital settings, with faded numbers that might as well have been hieroglyphics.

I cranked one to what seemed like a reasonable position and prayed for the best.

The refrigerator yielded a carton of eggs and a package of bacon that looked like it had been butchered on-site. I stared at the raw ingredients with the uncertainty of someone facing a bomb they needed to defuse.

"Cooking," I muttered. "Just like chemistry class, except edible. Supposedly."

I laid several strips of bacon in the pan, which immediately began to sizzle and pop alarmingly. Grease splattered my bare skin, and I yelped, dancing backward.

"Okay, so the heat's too high." I adjusted the knob, then cracked three eggs directly into the same pan because multitasking seemed efficient. The result was a disturbing swirl of clear egg white infiltrating the bacon grease.

Smoke began to rise from the pan. That seemed... suboptimal.

I located a spatula and attempted to separate the congealing mass, only succeeding in breaking the yolks, which bled yellow into the increasingly concerning concoction. More smoke billowed upward.

A popping sound drew my attention back to the bacon, where the grease had begun to bubble ominously.

One particularly enthusiastic bubble burst, sending a tiny spray of grease directly onto the burner's flame.

A blue-orange flash leapt up the side of the pan, and suddenly the entire bacon-egg catastrophe was engulfed in dancing flames.

A shrill beeping suddenly pierced the air, making me shriek and drop the spatula. The smoke detector—a device I'd failed to notice on the ceiling—was now screaming its displeasure at my culinary experiment.

"No, no, no!" I frantically waved a dish towel toward the ceiling, which only seemed to push more smoke toward the sensitive detector. The beeping intensified.

The bacon was now definitely on fire. Small, admittedly, but unmistakably flames where bacon should be.

My gaze landed on a red canister mounted on the wall—a fire extinguisher. I'd seen them used in movies. How hard could it be?

I grabbed it, fumbling with the pin as the smoke thickened. With a triumphant yank, I freed the safety mechanism and aimed the nozzle toward the flaming pan.

The resulting blast of white foam was so powerful it nearly knocked me backward.

It hit the stove with the force of a firehose, sending a plume of foam not just into the pan but across the entire kitchen.

The blast ricocheted off the hard surface of the cast iron, creating a blizzard of white that coated everything within a six-foot radius—including me.

By the time I managed to stop spraying, the kitchen looked like a snow globe of catastrophic failure. Foam dripped from the ceiling, the countertops, and my body. The fire was out, but so was any hope of a seductive breakfast scenario.

I stood in shock, spatula still clutched in one foam-covered hand, when the door burst open.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

Bodhi stood in the doorway, axe still in hand, eyes wild with alarm. His gaze swept from the foam-covered disaster to me—covered in extinguisher residue, wearing nothing but a now-white-coated apron and a thong that left my entire back and most of my backside exposed to his view.

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. I watched as his eyes widened, then darkened, his grip on the axe handle tightening until his knuckles whitened.

His jaw clenched visibly, and the muscles in his throat worked as he swallowed hard.

For one heated moment, he looked less like a man who'd discovered a disaster and more like a predator who'd spotted prey.

"I made breakfast," I finally said, gesturing weakly at the foam-submerged pan.

His expression shifted from that initial, primal reaction to something I couldn't quite read—a mixture of disbelief, exasperation, and something else that made my skin tingle despite the chemicals coating it.

"I can see that." He set the axe by the door with careful precision, like a man deliberately controlling his movements. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, suddenly aware of how ridiculous I must look. "Just my pride. And possibly your kitchen."

He approached slowly, surveying the damage with the resigned expression of a man who'd expected disaster but perhaps not quite this magnitude. When he reached me,

he lifted his hand to my face, his thumb gently wiping a glob of foam from my cheek.

Time suspended itself. His calloused thumb against my skin sent electricity shooting through my body that had nothing to do with the malfunctioning appliances.

His eyes—those whiskey-colored eyes that had seemed so cold yesterday—had darkened to something molten.

His bare chest was inches from me, close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from his skin.

"You've got..." His voice was rough as he brushed another spot of foam from my jaw, his touch lingering just a fraction too long to be casual. His thumb traced a slow path down to the corner of my mouth, hesitating there as his eyes followed the movement.

I could feel my pulse everywhere—in my throat, my wrists, between my legs. The kitchen suddenly felt too warm despite the open window, the air too thick to properly breathe.

"Everywhere," I finished for him, my voice embarrassingly breathy. "I've got foam everywhere."

Something flickered in his eyes—a flare of heat quickly banked—as his hand dropped reluctantly back to his side.

I swallowed hard, suddenly forgetting my carefully crafted seduction script. "So... do you order takeout from a local breakfast café? I could really go for some smoked salmon crepes, or maybe some Eggs Benedict."

The tension broke as his lips twitched into what might have been the ghost of a smile. "I have a river that delivers trout if you're patient."

"Somehow I don't think trout crepes are a thing," I replied, trying to maintain my composure despite being nearly naked, covered in fire extinguisher foam, and standing closer to him than strictly necessary.

He stepped back, breaking the moment, and tossed me a clean dish towel. "Get dressed. I'll handle this."

"But breakfast—"

"Will be ready when you're back. With clothes on," he commanded, his tone making it clear this wasn't a suggestion.

Ten minutes and an uncomfortably cold shower later (apparently the solar hot water needed more time to heat up), I returned to the kitchen wearing the most modest outfit I'd packed—which wasn't saying much.

The jeans were still tight enough to require a lying-down-on-the-bed wiggle to zip, and the v-neck t-shirt still showed more cleavage than my father would approve of, but at least all the important bits were covered.

The kitchen had been restored to some semblance of order.

The foam was gone, the pan cleaned and back on the stove, and the smoke detector had ceased its electronic tantrum.

Bodhi, now unfortunately wearing a shirt, was sliding perfectly cooked eggs onto two plates beside bacon that looked crispy rather than cremated.

"How did you do that with the same ingredients?" I asked, genuinely impressed and a little outraged. The eggs were perfectly cooked—the whites set but the yolks still runny—and the bacon was evenly crisped without a hint of char.

"Experience," he said simply, setting the plates on the small table. "And not setting the stove to nuclear."

"So you actually know how to cook?" I questioned, unable to hide my surprise. "I figured mountain men lived on beef jerky and squirrel stew."

He huffed what might have been a laugh. "Squirrels are too much work for too little meat."

After breakfast, which was surprisingly good for such simple fare, Bodhi offered to show me around the property. Whether this was genuine hospitality or a desire to keep me away from any more of his appliances was unclear.

The morning air was fresh with the scent of pine as we walked the perimeter of his land.

He pointed out various features with the precision of a museum guide who'd rather be anywhere else—the garden where he grew vegetables, the woodshed where he stored timber for winter, the small workshop where he built furniture.

"And this," he said finally, approaching a structure that looked like a miniature cabin, "is where Colonel and his ladies live."

The chicken coop was surprisingly elaborate, with a covered run area and what appeared to be handcrafted nesting boxes visible through the wire mesh. Colonel strutted importantly at our approach, his feathers puffed up as if he were lord of all he surveyed.

Six hens clucked softly in the background, pecking at the ground with far less dramatic flair than their male counterpart.

"You built this?" I asked, noting the careful craftsmanship of the small structure.

Bodhi nodded. "They need protection from predators. Bears, foxes, eagles would all consider them an easy meal."

Colonel approached Bodhi with what could only be described as adoration, pecking gently at his boots in what seemed like a greeting. Bodhi reached down and, to my astonishment, stroked the rooster's feathers. The bird actually leaned into his touch like a cat.

"Even his chicken is in love with him," I muttered under my breath. "Traitor."

Bodhi glanced up. "What?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Just admiring your... chicken whisperer abilities."

He stood, and Colonel resumed his patrol of the coop perimeter, occasionally shooting me suspicious glances.

"That bird has trust issues," I observed.

"He's protective," Bodhi corrected. "Keeps his flock safe."

The way he said it—with a hint of respect in his voice—made me wonder if he saw himself the same way. A protector. A guardian of his small domain against outside threats.

Including, perhaps, city girls with fire extinguishers and seduction plans.

I smiled to myself as we walked back toward the cabin. Operation: Deflower Me Now had suffered a minor setback, but I wasn't defeated. I just needed to adjust my

strategy.

After all, I'd seen the way his eyes had darkened when he'd touched my face. The way his gaze had momentarily dropped to my lips. Behind that gruff exterior was a man of flesh and blood, not stone.

And I had plenty more steps in my plan.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“The Invasive Species ”

Bodhi

"We're out of eggs."

I stared at the empty carton in my refrigerator, mentally calculating how long I could survive on jerky and canned beans before admitting defeat. Not long enough.

"Already?" Scarlett appeared in the kitchen doorway wearing a sundress so short and tight it looked painted on, her legs impossibly long and bare in the morning light.

I nearly choked on my own breath, forcing my eyes to stay on her face rather than the expanse of skin the tiny dress revealed. My hand tightened involuntarily on the refrigerator door as blood rushed to places that made rational thought difficult.

"I thought we just had eggs for breakfast yesterday," she continued, seemingly oblivious to my reaction as she stretched languidly against the doorframe.

The deliberate way she arched her back and tilted her head wasn't lost on me—this was no innocent morning stretch but a calculated move designed to draw my attention to her curves. I wasn't falling for it. Much.

"We did. You also used half a dozen in your..." I searched for a diplomatic term, "...culinary experiment."

Her lips twitched. "You mean my foam party?"

"That's one way to put it." I closed the refrigerator, resigned to the inevitable. "We need supplies. Town trip."

Her eyes lit up like I'd just announced an all-expenses-paid vacation instead of a forty-minute drive to Promise Ridge's excuse for a commercial district. "Town? As in civilization? With actual shops?"

"One shop," I corrected. "Mabel's General Store. And Hawk's Nest Outfitters if you need camping gear."

"I'd rather eat live spiders," she muttered, then brightened. "But a store means people! And probably cell service!"

"Spotty at best," I warned, but she was already rushing back to her room, leaving me to wonder how anyone could be so excited about Mabel's collection of canned goods and fishing tackle.

I grabbed my keys and wallet, mentally preparing for the ordeal ahead. Taking Scarlett to town was like bringing a tropical bird to the Arctic—nothing good could come of it.

Twenty minutes later, I was still waiting by the truck when her voice called from inside the cabin.

"Bodhi! I need help!"

I found her in the bathroom, surrounded by enough beauty products to stock a small pharmacy. The tiny counter was covered with bottles, tubes, and things I couldn't identify if my life depended on it. She was holding what looked like a metal wand connected to a cord.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't get this to work." She waved the metal instrument. "Your outlets are weird."

I stared at the device. "What is that, a weapon?"

She laughed. "It's a curling iron. For my hair?"

"Your hair looks fine," I said automatically. It was more than fine—it was like living flame cascading over her shoulders—but admitting that seemed dangerous.

"Sweet, but not helpful." She held out the curling iron. "I've tried every outlet, but nothing's working."

I took the device, examining it critically. "Too much power draw. The solar system prioritizes essentials—refrigerator, basic lighting. Hair appliances didn't make the cut."

Her face fell in a way that seemed disproportionate to the situation. "So I can't fix my hair at all?"

Something about her expression—a vulnerability I hadn't seen before—made me hesitate instead of dismissing her concern outright.

"Show me what you're trying to do."

Twenty minutes and a crash course in the mysteries of hair curling later, I found myself standing behind Scarlett, awkwardly twisting sections of her hair around my fingers to create loose waves.

Her improvised solution involved me wrapping strands around my fingers while she

counted to thirty, then carefully releasing them into what she called "finger curls. "

"You're actually pretty good at this," she remarked, watching me in the mirror as I fumbled with another section of silky red hair. "Those ranger skills transferring to hair styling?"

"Rope work," I muttered, trying to ignore how intimate this felt. "Similar principle."

"Ah yes, because women's hair and tactical gear are practically the same thing."

Her scent—something floral and expensive—filled the small bathroom, making it hard to concentrate.

Each time my fingers brushed against her neck, she would inhale slightly, and I found myself deliberately letting my knuckles graze the sensitive skin more often than necessary.

Standing this close, I could see the freckles dusting her shoulders where her sundress left them exposed.

"There," I finally said, stepping back before I did something stupid. "Will that work?"

She examined herself critically in the mirror, then smiled. "Not bad, mountain man. Not bad at all."

I escaped to the truck, needing fresh air and distance. What was happening to me? I'd survived fires with more composure than I was showing around this woman.

Just as I thought we might finally leave, she reappeared in the doorway, calling for assistance again. This time, she was holding what looked like tiny black spiders.

"I need help with my lashes," she announced.

"Your what?"

"Eyelashes. False ones." She held up the tiny strips. "I can't see properly to apply them."

"We're going to Mabel's," I reminded her. "Not a photo shoot."

Her eyebrows shot up. "A girl has to have her face on, even in the wilderness. Now help me with these lashes." She thrust a small tube toward me. "Put a tiny dot of glue on the strip, then place it on my lash line. Easy."

Nothing about this seemed easy.

Fifteen excruciating minutes later, with Scarlett directing me like a general commanding troops ("No, not there! Higher! Thinner line of glue! Careful, you'll poke my eye out!"), we had successfully applied what appeared to be caterpillars to her eyelids.

"Perfect!" She batted her newly enhanced lashes at me. "What do you think?"

"I think we've wasted an hour on cosmetic enhancements for a trip to buy eggs."

She seemed unperturbed by my grumpiness, dabbing something glossy on her full lips. "Beauty is never a waste of time, Bodhi. It's an investment."

"In what?"

"In making people underestimate you." She winked, brushing past me to the truck. "Let's go to town."

The drive to Promise Ridge was silent except for Scarlett's occasional gasp when we hit a particularly vicious pothole. She spent most of the journey checking her appearance in a compact mirror, adjusting things that looked perfectly fine to me.

"This is it?" she asked as we pulled into what generously could be called the town center. "This is the entire town?"

Promise Ridge's main street consisted of exactly four buildings: Mabel's General Store (which also housed the post office), Hawk's Nest Outfitters, The Ridge Diner, and a gas station with a single pump that had been displaying the "Be Right Back" sign for approximately three years.

"Welcome to metropolis," I deadpanned, parking in front of Mabel's.

"It's... quaint," she offered, which I interpreted as city-speak for "horrifically primitive."

Mabel Kovacs was restocking sacks of rice when we entered, the bell above the door announcing our arrival with an unnecessarily cheerful jingle.

At seventy-five, Mabel had the energy of someone half her age and the vocabulary of a sailor twice it.

Her blue-dyed hair was piled atop her head in what she called her "don't-give-a-damn updo. "

She peered over her reading glasses as we approached, her shrewd eyes cataloging Scarlett's tiny sundress, carefully applied makeup, and the diamond studs in her ears that probably cost more than Mabel's monthly inventory.

"Well, well," she drawled, setting down her price gun.

"If it isn't the Unabomber himself, gracing us with his presence.

And company!" She turned her attention fully to Scarlett.

"This the mail-order? Huh. Thought Flint ordered you someone who could milk a goat.

This one looks like she'd milk a credit card. "

I suppressed a groan. "Mabel, this is Scarlett. Scarlett, this is Mabel. She owns the store and apparently all the bad manners in the county."

"Pleasure," Scarlett replied, extending her hand like she was meeting royalty instead of a foul-mouthed shopkeeper in overalls.

Mabel shook it, eyeing her with undisguised curiosity. "You actually agreed to marry this grizzly bear? Voluntarily?"

"It's... complicated," Scarlett answered with a polite smile that revealed nothing.

"Ain't it always." Mabel cackled. "Well, consider this your welcome to Promise Ridge, honey. If you need the dirt on your new man, I've got files thicker than the Bible."

"We need eggs," I interjected before this conversation could deteriorate further. "And whatever else is on this list." I handed over the paper I'd scribbled on earlier.

"Help yourselves," Mabel gestured around the store. "I'll get the stuff from the back."

As Mabel disappeared through a swinging door, Scarlett surveyed the small store with the expression of an anthropologist discovering a new civilization.

"I'll be right back," I told her. "Try not to buy out the entire store."

"Wait, where are you—"

"Post office counter," I gestured to the small window at the back. "Need to check if any packages came in."

I left her examining a display of locally made honey with the caution one might reserve for potentially radioactive materials.

After confirming no packages had arrived (which I'd known, but needed an excuse for a moment's peace), I returned to find Scarlett wandering the aisles with increasing dismay.

"But where is the gourmet cheese section?" she was asking Mabel, who had returned with a box of supplies. "The olive bar? Or at least some artisanal bread? How do people LIVE?"

"We live just fine," Mabel replied with the patience of someone who'd fielded similar questions from tourists. "Cheese is in the cooler. White or orange, take your pick."

"That's it? Two options?" Scarlett looked genuinely distressed. "What about brie? Gouda? Aged cheddar with truffles?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

"Honey, the only truffles around here are the chocolate ones near the register, and they've been there since Valentine's."

I grabbed a basket and began loading it with necessities, leaving Scarlett to her culinary crisis. By the time I'd gathered everything on my list, she'd assembled her own collection of items—mostly snacks with bright packaging and ingredients I couldn't pronounce.

"Comfort food," she explained when she caught me eyeing her selections. "A girl needs her emergency chocolate."

After paying (and enduring more of Mabel's not-so-subtle inquiries about our "arrangement"), we loaded the supplies into the truck.

"Flint's next," I announced, nodding toward Hawk's Nest Outfitters across the street. "Need to pick up a propane tank."

"The one who signed you up for Mountain Mates?" Scarlett asked. "This should be fun."

"For you, maybe."

Hawk's Nest Outfitters was housed in what used to be a hardware store before the lumber mill closed down. Flint and his wife Josie had transformed it into an outdoor enthusiast's paradise, stocking everything from high-end fishing gear to bear-proof food containers.

Josie spotted us first, her eyes widening as she took in Scarlett's carefully curated appearance. "Bodhi! And you must be Scarlett!" She rushed forward, wiping her hands on her jeans before offering one to Scarlett. "I'm Josie Hawthorne. So wonderful to meet you!"

Josie's enthusiasm was genuine if overwhelming. At thirty-eight, she had the energy of a teenager and a no-nonsense attitude that had kept Flint in line since kindergarten. Her dark hair was pulled back in a practical ponytail, and her smile was warm enough to melt permafrost.

"Flint's in the back," she told me, already guiding Scarlett toward a display of women's hiking boots. "He'll be thrilled you're here."

"Thrilled" was not the word I would have chosen for Flint's reaction when I found him arranging fishing tackle. "Gleeful" or "insufferably smug" seemed more accurate.

"She came!" he exclaimed, abandoning his task to slap me on the shoulder. "I told you it would work!"

"You told me she was a sweet, traditional girl who wanted the simple life," I hissed, keeping my voice low. "Not a high-maintenance city princess who thinks a curling iron is essential survival gear."

Flint peered around the shelving unit to where Scarlett was examining a sleeping bag with an expression of horror. "She's wearing diamond earrings and that tiny dress to shop for bear spray," he observed. "What did you DO?"

"Nothing! She came this way! Like an invasive species in heels!"

"But why is she so...?" He made a vague gesture encompassing Scarlett's entire being.

"Because her profile was as fake as yours was for me," I growled. "She's not who she claimed to be. And now I'm stuck with her, at least temporarily."

Flint studied me for a moment, then grinned. "You like her."

"I do not."

"You do. I can tell. You've got that same look you had when you found that abandoned bluejay with the broken wing. All grumpy on the outside but secretly planning to nurse it back to health."

"She's not a bluejay."

"No, she's much prettier. And probably has better personal hygiene."

I glared at him, but before I could respond, Josie called out from the front. "Bodhi! Scarlett wants to know if the mini bear spray comes in pink!"

Flint's barely suppressed laughter followed me as I went to rescue Scarlett from what appeared to be a standoff with a display of survival gear.

"It's not fashion, it's function," I explained, taking the canister from her manicured fingers. "The color is irrelevant when a 400-pound grizzly is charging."

"Everything is better in the right color," she insisted.

"It's a scientific fact." She scanned the display again, lips pursed in disappointment.

"If I'm going to face certain death by bear, the least you could do is let me look cute while doing it."

Pink would complement my complexion when they find my remains. "

I couldn't tell if she was joking or completely serious. The worrying part was, I suspected it was the latter.

Despite myself, I felt the corner of my mouth twitch. Her absurdity was oddly refreshing after years of stoic military logic.

We left with the propane tank, two rolls of duct tape, and a bright red emergency whistle that Josie insisted was "perfect for Scarlett."

As we loaded the supplies into the truck, I noticed Scarlett checking her phone again, despite my warning about the lack of service. She'd been doing it repeatedly—a nervous tic that suggested more than simple social media withdrawal.

"What are you running from?" I asked bluntly as we pulled away from the outfitters.

Her fingers stilled on the screen, but her expression remained carefully neutral. "Just the tyranny of good Wi-Fi and indoor plumbing," she deflected with a flip of her hair.

I raised an eyebrow, not buying it for a second. "You check that phone every five minutes like you're expecting bad news, even though there's no service."

"It's a habit," she shrugged. "Like how you probably check the sky before deciding what to wear."

I let it drop, recognizing a defensive wall when I saw one. Whatever she was hiding, she wasn't ready to share it yet.

As we approached the town's only intersection, I noticed an unfamiliar vehicle parked near the gas station—a sleek black Mercedes with tinted windows that stood out like

a penguin at a chicken convention.

The driver appeared to be taking photos of the street with a professional camera fitted with a long-range lens.

"Tourist," Scarlett suggested when she noticed my attention. "Probably documenting authentic small-town America for their Instagram."

But something about the car made my instincts buzz with warning. In my experience, people who could afford vehicles like that didn't "discover" places like Promise Ridge by accident.

As we passed, the driver lowered the camera just enough for me to glimpse dark sunglasses and the edge of what appeared to be an expensive suit.

I made a mental note of the license plate, filing away the detail with the same automatic response I'd developed in Afghanistan—potential threat, monitor situation, gather intelligence.

"What's wrong?" Scarlett asked, noticing my tension.

"Nothing," I lied, not wanting to alarm her without confirmation. "Just thinking about what to make for dinner with our new goods."

She seemed to accept this, returning to her contemplation of the passing trees. But my mind was working through scenarios, calculating risks and responses.

If she really was running from something—or someone—my peaceful mountain existence was about to become significantly more complicated.

And I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about the fact that my first instinct wasn't

irritation, but fierce protectiveness.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Operation Banana Republic ”

Scarlett

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, assessing my collection of wooing strategies I'd been saving for desperate times. Two days in the mountain wilderness, and Operation: Deflower Me Now was failing spectacularly.

"Time for the nuclear option," I told my reflection, applying a fresh coat of red lipstick.

I'd abandoned subtlety after our trip to town yielded zero romantic progress.

If Bodhi Wilder wasn't going to respond to a sundress that barely covered the essentials, more drastic measures were clearly required.

I rummaged through my suitcase, locating the "emergency" items I'd packed for this exact scenario. Enticing a man was like any tactical operation—proper planning prevented poor performance. And I always came prepared.

The evening had settled into a comfortable rhythm of domesticity that was completely at odds with my scheme to win him over.

Bodhi had grilled fish for dinner—actual fish he'd caught himself in the stream behind his cabin, which was both impressive and mildly terrifying.

The man could apparently produce food from nature like some bearded wilderness

magician.

Now he sat on the couch, reading something that looked suspiciously like poetry, his profile illuminated by the warm glow of an oil lamp. The electricity was conserving itself again, or whatever technical explanation he'd given for why we were living like it was 1862.

Perfect. Dim lighting was optimal for seduction. Everyone knew that.

I retreated to my room, changed into the shortest shorts I owned and a tank top thin enough to be illegal in several southern states, and put my plan into action.

Phase One: The Banana Demonstration.

I'd found the fruit at Mabel's general store—the only fresh produce in the entire establishment besides some elderly-looking apples. Now, I sauntered into the living room with casual grace, banana in hand, and settled into the comfy armchair opposite Bodhi.

He glanced up briefly, then returned to his book. Not exactly the double-take I was hoping for.

I made a soft noise to catch his attention as I began peeling the banana with choreographed moves, never taking my eyes off him.

"Hungry?" he asked absently, turning a page.

"Mmm, starving," I purred, channeling every adult film actress I'd ever accidentally encountered during late-night internet rabbit holes.

I brought the banana to my lips, parting them slowly. I gave the tip a gentle kiss

before taking it into my mouth with exaggerated care. I hollowed my cheeks as I took it deeper, making a small, appreciative sound in the back of my throat.

Bodhi glanced up again, his brow furrowing slightly.

Encouraged, I increased my performance. I withdrew the banana halfway, then took it deeper, refusing to break visual connection.

"Are you... okay?" he asked, lowering his book. "Did you bite your tongue?"

I nearly choked. Was he serious? How could anyone be this dense?

"I'm fine," I said, recovering quickly. "Just enjoying my... fruit."

"You look like you're in pain," he observed, genuine concern in his voice. "Is it not ripe?"

"It's perfect," I insisted, doubling down on my performance. I licked the length of the banana with the tip of my tongue, swirling it around the end before taking it between my lips again.

Bodhi was definitely watching now, his book forgotten in his lap. Bewilderment gave way to something hungrier in his eyes. The pulse at his throat visibly quickened, and a faint sheen of perspiration appeared on his forehead despite the coolness of the evening. Progress!

"Do you like watching me eat... fruit?" I asked, licking my lips slowly.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his fingers digging into the worn leather cover of his book. "Are you hungry? I have actual dinner leftovers if you want."

Frustration simmered in my chest. Was he playing dumb on purpose? Or did he genuinely not recognize flirtation when it was literally shoved in his face?

Time to take things up another notch. I slid the banana even deeper between my lips, holding his stare without blinking as I made my intentions unmistakable.

His pupils expanded, leaving only a thin ring of amber around the edges, and I could see the rapid rhythm of his heartbeat at his throat.

His breathing grew shallow, the scent of pine and smoke clinging to him as he leaned forward almost imperceptibly. Finally!

And then, driven by frustration and a desire to make my point unmistakably clear, I bit down hard, severing the banana with my teeth.

Bodhi visibly flinched, his hand dropping instinctively to protect his lap. His eyes widened in what could only be described as primal fear.

"What?" I asked innocently, chewing the piece of banana. "I'm still hungry. Got any more... long, firm fruit you'd like to share?"

He swallowed hard. "There's apples in the root cellar."

I nearly screamed. Instead, I finished the banana in two more aggressive bites, tossing the peel onto the coffee table with more force than necessary.

"You know what? I think I need something with more... power." I stood abruptly, marching back to my room. "Don't go anywhere."

"Wasn't planning on it," he called after me, sounding genuinely confused.

I returned moments later with Phase Two of my plan: a sleek, rhinestone-encrusted device that had cost more than my first car payment. I placed it on the coffee table between us, where the crystals caught the lamplight and scattered tiny rainbows across the wooden surface.

Bodhi stared at it for a long moment, his mouth slightly open.

"Is that... does it... why does it have so many buttons?" he finally managed, leaning forward to examine it more closely.

"It's a vibrator," I explained casually, as though discussing the weather. "Top of the line. This baby has seventeen different settings, from 'gentle flutter' to 'seismic event.' Waterproof, rechargeable, and yes, those are actual Swarovski crystals."

His face turned an interesting shade of red. "You... use this?"

"Not yet," I admitted. "But I've been looking forward to breaking it in. According to the reviews, the 'pulse wave' setting is so good it's made women cancel dates."

He choked slightly. "Why would you want that?"

"Because apparently it's that satisfying," I explained. "The 'I'd rather stay home with this than deal with disappointing men' kind of satisfying."

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "That's... educational."

"Want to see how it works?" I reached for the device.

"I don't think—"

"It's very simple." I picked it up, turning it in my hands. "This button controls

intensity, this one changes the pattern, and this one—"

My finger accidentally pressed a combination of buttons, and the vibrator hummed awake with startling power. It bucked from my hands like a startled animal, buzzing across the coffee table and launching itself directly at Bodhi.

He reacted with impressive reflexes, catching it mid-air. Unfortunately, his grip must have hit another button because it suddenly pulsed with even greater intensity, causing him to yelp and fling it across the room.

The vibrator landed with a thud near the front door, vibrating wildly against the wooden planks. Colonel, who had been skulking near the window, immediately went into defensive mode, fluffing his feathers and advancing on the intruder with militant determination.

The sight of a rooster squaring off against a rhinestone-studded vibrator—feathers raised, head bobbing in challenge as he circled the mechanical invader—was too much.

I burst into laughter, clutching my sides as tears formed in my eyes.

To my surprise, Bodhi joined me, his deep chuckle filling the small cabin.

"Is that a weapon?" he gasped between laughs. "Or a rocket ship? Does it launch something?"

"It launches orgasms, Bodhi," I managed through my giggles. "Multiple ones."

Our eyes met across the room, laughter slowly fading into something heavier. The small cabin suddenly felt as hot as a sauna.

Colonel, sensing the shift in atmosphere, pecked experimentally at the still-buzzing vibrator, then leapt back in alarm when it vibrated against his beak.

Bodhi made his way to the other side, carefully approached the device, and after examining it for a moment, located a recessed button on the base.

He pressed it firmly until the vibrations gradually slowed and finally stopped.

"Your chicken is a prude," I observed, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes.

"Unlike his houseguest," Bodhi countered, his words coming out low and gravelly, raising goosebumps on my skin as he returned with the now-silent vibrator.

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you slut-shaming me, mountain man?"

He turned the device over in his calloused hands thoughtfully. "I'm wondering why someone would invest in toys this expensive without having tried them," he said, his gaze flicking up to study my face.

My breath caught in my throat. The moment stretched between us, filled with unspoken questions.

"What makes you think I've never used them?" I asked, attempting nonchalance.

"Just an observation," he said, his expression unreadable. "Am I right?"

I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Fine. Yes. I'm a twenty-four-year-old virgin with a collection of untested sex toys. Happy?"

"Didn't say I was happy or sad about it." He set the vibrator carefully on the coffee table. "Just curious why someone like you would be in such a hurry to change that

status with someone like me."

"Someone like me?" I challenged, rising to my feet. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"City girl. Rich family. Designer everything." He gestured vaguely at my existence. "You could have anyone."

"Maybe I don't want anyone," I shot back. "Maybe I want someone specific."

"A mountain hermit who talks to chickens?"

"A man who won't report back to my father or post pictures online or expect me to be some perfect little conservative wife."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "You're using me."

"Isn't that the point of this whole arrangement?" I inched forward, refusing to back down. "You get a pretend bride to keep your friends off your back, I get..." I gestured between us, "...whatever this would be."

"And then what? You go back to Atlanta with your virginity conveniently disposed of?"

Put that way, it sounded awful. Calculating. Cold. But wasn't that exactly my plan?

He moved closer, towering over me. The heat from his body was palpable even inches away. His gaze traveled from my eyes to my lips and back, lingering long enough to make my heart race. Uncertainty flickered across his features, quickly replaced by something darker.

"You could use a good spanking," he said suddenly, the rough texture of his voice

sending a delicious shiver through me.

I recovered quickly, tilting my chin up defiantly. "Go ahead. I'd probably like that."

He blinked, clearly not expecting that response. Then he rolled his eyes, shaking his head. "You're such a brat."

"And you're a tease," I countered. "All mountain man muscles and intense stares, but heaven forbid you actually do something about it."

The muscles in his face tensed, and for a moment, I thought I'd pushed too far.

The way he looked at me—like he was imagining exactly what he'd do if he let himself lose control—made my knees weak.

A flush crept up from his collar, and his fingers curled into loose fists, the cords in his neck standing out in sharp relief.

"You have no idea what you're asking for," he said quietly.

"Then show me." I closed the distance between us, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his body.

Something primal and unspoken passed between us. He hadn't moved away, and conflict was evident in his expression—desire warring with restraint. His breathing turned ragged, tension rippling across his face.

"Scarlett," he began, his words rasped, "I don't think—"

The sudden, frantic barking of dogs outside cut him off mid-sentence. Not just ordinary barking—this was the high-pitched, urgent sound of canines detecting a

threat.

Bodhi transformed instantly. The conflicted, desire-laden man disappeared, replaced by someone focused and dangerous.

He traversed the small living space to a cabinet I hadn't noticed before, pulling out a long rifle with swift, decisive movements.

"Stay inside," he ordered, all playfulness gone from his voice.

"Lock the door behind me. If I'm not back in ten minutes, release Colonel. He's been trained for this."

"Trained for what?" I asked, alarmed by the sudden shift. "What does the chicken do??"

But Bodhi was already moving toward the door, his hands checking the rifle with the smooth certainty of someone who'd done it thousands of times.

The teasing mountain man had vanished, replaced by someone who moved with the focused alertness of a soldier, his eyes methodically sweeping the darkness beyond the windows.

Then he was gone, disappearing into the night with a ghostlike stealth that left me more unsettled than comforted.

I locked the door behind him as instructed, my heart racing. The cabin suddenly seemed very small and very vulnerable.

Colonel stared at me from his perch near the window, his beady eyes unblinking. He tilted his head in that unsettling bird way, as if judging my capability as a backup

security system.

"So," I said to him, the vibrator still clutched forgotten in my hand, "what exactly are you trained to do? Peck intruders to death? Send coded messages with your clucking? Alert the nearest lumberjack convention?"

The rooster ruffled his feathers importantly, puffing up to nearly twice his size as if to say, "That's classified information, princess."

"Great," I muttered, moving to peer out the window into the darkness. "I'm hiding in a cabin with a top-secret military chicken while a man I've known for two days stalks through the darkness playing Rambo."

I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly aware of how ridiculous this whole situation was. My femme fatale performance had crumbled the moment real danger appeared. Now I was just a girl from Atlanta, way out of her element, watching the door with growing unease.

What bothered me most wasn't the potential threat outside or even my spectacular failure at losing my V-card—it was the knot of worry tightening in my chest with each passing minute. The thought of Bodhi getting hurt made my stomach twist in a way that caught me completely off-guard.

Damn it. I hadn't come all this way to develop actual feelings for the mountain hermit. That wasn't part of the plan at all.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Dangerous Directions”

Bodhi

The night air cut through my shirt as I moved silently across the property, rifle ready.

The frantic barking from Mack's hunting hounds had stopped abruptly, leaving an unnatural quiet that raised the hair on my neck.

Those dogs rarely came this far up the mountain, and I'd never heard them sound that alarmed before tonight.

Something—or someone—had disturbed them.

The mountain breeze carried the usual forest odors, but mixed with something jarring—the unmistakable trace of designer cologne that had no business this far from civilization. I moved away from the cabin, sticking to the shadows where the moonlight couldn't reach.

Eight minutes of careful searching revealed nothing beyond ordinary forest movement and the occasional startled rabbit. Still, that warning feeling in my gut wouldn't quiet down—the same feeling that had saved my life more times than I cared to count.

I widened my search, moving further from the cabin in larger circles. The half-moon gave just enough light to see without needing a flashlight that would have announced my position to anyone watching.

Near where my property met the old logging trail, something glinted in the moonlight—something that didn't belong. I approached carefully, rifle ready, until I could make out the object half-buried in pine needles.

A watch.

Not the kind you'd wear fishing or hunting. This was pure luxury—gold case, fancy face, expensive. The kind of watch men wore to silently brag about their bank accounts.

I studied it without touching. Clean, unscratched, and still ticking. It hadn't been here long.

This wasn't coincidence—not with Scarlett checking her phone every five minutes and that black Mercedes I'd spotted in town, the driver in dark sunglasses photographing Main Street as we'd passed. The way she'd tensed when I mentioned seeing an unfamiliar car.

Someone had found her—someone with deep pockets.

I used my bandana to pick up the watch without leaving fingerprints. Some training never leaves you, no matter how far from the battlefield you get. The thing felt heavy in my hand, probably solid gold.

For another twenty minutes, I searched the property, finding nothing else out of place. Whoever left the watch had disappeared without bothering to retrieve such a valuable item—another red flag.

I'd been gone about thirty-five minutes—way longer than the ten-minute deadline I'd given Scarlett. As I approached the cabin, I spotted Colonel through the window, standing sentry on the back of the couch. So much for my emergency protocol.

I paused at the door, listening. The cabin was quiet except for the usual creaks of old timber. I entered carefully, rifle ready, sweeping the familiar shadows cast by the oil lamp's glow.

Then I saw Scarlett, and nearly forgot why I'd gone outside in the first place.

She stood in her bedroom doorway, but not as I'd left her.

The shorts and tank top were gone, replaced by something that barely qualified as clothing.

Black lace arranged in strategic strips covered just enough to avoid complete indecency, but not much more.

The kind of outfit with exactly one purpose in mind.

"You're back," she said, relief mixing with something practiced in her voice. "I tried letting Colonel out like you said, but he just stared at me like I was crazy. Refused to budge from his spot."

I placed the rifle back in its cabinet, buying time to collect myself. "Figures. Only follows orders when it suits him."

"Find anything out there?" she asked, sashaying into the room with the strut of a model on a catwalk.

I held up the piece of men's jewelry, letting the lamplight catch it. "This was near the property line."

She went pale as winter frost, the practiced confidence vanishing in an instant. Her shoulders stiffened, and genuine fear flashed across her features before she tried to

hide it.

"Where exactly?" Her voice had gone tight.

"By the logging trail." I forced my gaze to stay locked on her eyes, though it took more willpower than staying perfectly still while a bear investigates your campsite. "You know whose it is."

"I—" She shook her head quickly. "Lots of people wear expensive watches. Could be from anyone."

"Scarlett." Just her name, but loaded with disbelief.

Instead of answering, she stepped closer, switching tactics. "We can deal with that tomorrow," she said, her voice dropping lower. "Let's focus on more... immediate concerns."

"Like what?"

She touched her finger to her tongue, then drew a damp line down my shirt front.

"Like getting you out of these wet clothes," she said with an exaggerated wink.

I couldn't help a short laugh. "That's what you're going with?"

"Not working?" She pressed against me, the heat from her skin radiating through my shirt.

"It's ridiculous," I said, though I betrayed my own better judgment by settling my hands at her waist.

"Don't you want what you signed up for?" she asked, looking up at me through those fake lashes I'd helped her apply earlier. "Your mail-order bride, delivery confirmed?"

"I didn't sign up for anything," I reminded her, my voice rougher than I intended. "And you're not a package deal."

"Yet here I am," she countered, resting her palms against my chest. "Aren't you going to at least see what you got?"

"That outfit doesn't leave much to the imagination," I said, glancing at her deliberate costume.

"Sometimes the smallest packages contain the best surprises," she replied, close enough now that the cabin suddenly felt too small, too warm, too confining for what was building between us.

I should have stepped back. Should have maintained distance. But I'd been alone too long, and despite all the reasons this was a terrible idea, I couldn't deny how much I wanted her.

I dipped my head toward hers, hesitating just a breath away, giving her one last chance to back away.

She met my challenge head-on instead.

When our mouths met, it felt like the moment before a summer storm breaks—all that built-up tension finally finding release.

She tasted like the wild mountain berries that grow on my property—sweet with an unexpected bite.

I pulled her closer, the feel of her curves against me sending heat racing through my body.

She made a sound low in her throat that hit me harder than any physical blow I'd taken.

I gripped her hair, steadying her the way I would brace myself before felling a difficult tree.

Backing her against the wall, I felt her body align perfectly with mine.

She wrapped her leg around my hip, pulling me tighter, making it damn near impossible to remember why I'd been keeping my distance.

Her hands slipped under my shirt, exploring with obvious appreciation. I traced the edges where lace met skin, memorizing the contrast between delicate fabric and warm flesh.

"Bedroom," she breathed against my lips, the word half-demand, half-question.

Her body against mine felt right in a way I hadn't experienced in years. But even as desire clouded my thoughts, something sharper cut through—suspicion. The watch. The Mercedes. Her fear.

For a second, my resolve cracked like ice in spring thaw. But this wasn't about me. I was just convenient shelter from whatever storm was chasing her.

I stepped back, breaking contact. She blinked up at me, confusion replacing desire in her expression.

"What's wrong?" She reached for me again.

I moved further away, needing distance to think clearly. "This. The whole performance. You're not here for me."

She stared like I'd suddenly started speaking another language. "Are you blind? I'm half-naked and practically begging you to take me to bed."

"That's exactly my point." I pushed my hair back from my face. "This isn't about wanting me. It's about using me to solve some other problem."

Her eyes narrowed. "I want you," she said simply, her eyes briefly dropping before meeting mine again with surprising directness. "And clearly, you want me too."

I held up the watch instead of responding to that. "Who does this belong to? What are you running from?"

The seduction act she'd been putting on wavered, then disappeared completely. With a deep sigh that seemed to deflate her whole body, she moved to the couch, carefully moving aside the banana peel and vibrator from her earlier attempts.

"It's Langley's," she admitted, sinking onto the cushions. "My fiancé."

I sat beside her, leaving enough space between us that I could think straight.

"Fiancé?" I stared at her, pieces suddenly clicking into place—her desperation to get away, the seduction attempts, everything. "You're running from your own wedding?"

She nodded, staring at her hands. "Langley Richardson," she confirmed. "Harvard Law. Son of my father's biggest church donor. Complete nightmare behind closed doors. My father arranged the whole thing."

"He followed you here."

"Somehow." A humorless laugh escaped her. "I was so careful—paid cash, avoided highways, told no one where I was going."

"Yet he found you."

"Yet he found me." She glanced toward the door, a small shiver running through her. "Do you think he's still out there?"

"Not right now. But he'll be back." I noticed how different she looked without the flirtation and sharp edges—smaller, younger, genuinely afraid. "Tell me everything, Scarlett."

She took a deep breath and began explaining.

Her father, a televangelist with political connections, had essentially sold her to the Richardson family, arranging the marriage to benefit his ministry.

She'd emptied a secret account and fled, finding Mountain Mates during a desperate search for somewhere to hide.

"So you didn't pick me because you wanted a mountain man," I said when she finished. "You picked me because I was the opposite of what your father wanted."

"Not entirely," she countered, straightening her spine. "I had options. You were my first choice though. You were guaranteed to make my father's blood pressure spike." A hint of her usual spirit returned to her eyes. "I figured if I had to hide out, might as well be with someone easy on the eyes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, Bodhi. Playing dumb doesn't suit you," she said with unexpected

directness. "The alternative was a guy with a Santa beard who stuffed dead animals for fun. I had my reasons."

I couldn't help a slight smile despite everything. "Quite the endorsement."

We sat quietly for a moment, the watch resting on the coffee table between us like evidence from a crime scene.

"What happens now?" she finally asked.

"We keep you safe," I said simply. "This place is sturdier than it looks. Good locks, solid construction, rifle within reach. I've dealt with threats before. We'll handle this one too."

"I can stay?" The vulnerability in her question caught me off guard.

"You can stay," I confirmed. "But we're not sleeping together just to check a box on your escape plan."

Disappointment flashed across her face like a shadow. "I thought—"

"That losing your virginity would somehow free you from this engagement?"

"I said, finally understanding her earlier attempts at seduction.

"Men like him don't really care about that.

They care about ownership. Running away without ending things officially just makes you property that's gone missing. "

She didn't argue, telling me I'd hit the mark.

"If anything happens between us," I said, surprising myself, "it should be because you want me, not because I'm convenient cover."

She studied me like I was a puzzle she couldn't quite figure out. "Most guys wouldn't turn this down," she said, gesturing to herself.

"I'm not most guys." I shrugged. "Out here, you learn the difference between what you want and what you need."

She nodded slowly, then stood, adjusting her outfit. "I should probably change into something less desperate."

I watched her walk toward her bedroom, appreciating her honesty more than her attempts at seduction.

"Bodhi?" She paused at her door.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." Simple words, but genuine. "For believing me."

I nodded, not trusting what might come out if I spoke.

After she disappeared into her room, I examined the watch one more time before locking it in the old strongbox under my floorboards.

Initials carved into the back—LR—confirmed her story.

This Langley Richardson had resources, connections, and the kind of entitlement that wouldn't accept losing what he considered his.

Strange how quickly priorities can shift. Two days ago, my biggest concern was that stubborn deck post. Now I was planning defensive strategies against some nepo baby who thought he owned the woman sleeping under my roof.

The sound of the bathroom door opening pulled me from my thoughts. Scarlett emerged wearing an oversized t-shirt and loose-fitting shorts—the most modest outfit I'd seen on her yet, and somehow more appealing than the lingerie. She gave me a small, uncertain smile before disappearing into her room.

That smile hit me harder than it should have. It wasn't calculated or practiced—just a moment of genuine gratitude from a woman who hadn't expected kindness.

I settled into my chair facing the door, gun within reach. Whatever came next, she wouldn't face it alone.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Operation: Escape the Ex”

Scarlett

Colonel watched me from the window, his beady eyes judging me as thoroughly as my mother's disapproving glances during Sunday service. Day two of cabin living, and the rooster had already established a morning routine of monitoring me.

"Still on surveillance duty, I see," I muttered, stretching my stiff back.

The army-surplus mattress hadn't done me any favors overnight, and my hair looked even worse than yesterday's electrocution victim style.

I slipped into my silk robe—still the only touch of luxury in this wilderness outpost—and checked my phone. No service, as expected.

The cabin was quiet. No sign of Bodhi. As I moved toward the kitchen, I noticed a folded note on the nightstand, my name written across it:

Scarlett,

Gone to town for security supplies after last night's discovery. Back before noon. Rifle's locked in cabinet - DON'T touch it. Stay inside.

—B

P.S. Don't let Colonel in. He's still keeping an eye on your vibrator.

The clock read 9:17 AM. Hours before Bodhi would return. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that reading notes wasn't breakfast.

I found peanut butter and bread in the kitchen and made myself a sandwich while surveying the space. Dust bunnies had colonized every corner, clearly feeling secure in their long-established territory.

"Well," I said to no one, "might as well make myself useful."

If I was hiding in a mountain man's home, I could at least clean it. I grabbed the broom from the corner—a tool I'd only ever seen in the hands of our housekeeper, never my own.

My first sweep sent dust clouds billowing, triggering a sneeze that startled Colonel from his window perch. He flapped away, looking offended.

"Oh, please. Like you could do better," I called after him.

Twenty minutes and several sneezing fits later, I'd created neat dust piles. In Atlanta, messes disappeared while I was at brunch. Here, housekeeping required actual effort.

I found a dustpan under the sink and scooped up my collections of debris. Not bad for someone whose cleaning experience ended at pressing "start" on a dishwasher.

Moving to the living area, I carefully shifted stacks of books before sweeping underneath. One leather-bound volume caught my eye—thicker than the others, with no title on its worn spine.

Inside were hand-drawn sketches of breathtaking detail. Trees with bark so realistic I could almost feel the texture. Sunsets captured in watercolor, each labeled with only a date. Birds in flight, their wingspan measurements noted underneath.

Between the drawings were handwritten passages:

Mountain silence speaks louder than city noise, Yet sometimes the quiet screams so loud I'd trade one sunset for a single human voice That isn't my own, echoing off empty walls.

I closed the journal, something tight forming in my chest. "Great," I whispered. "He's gorgeous AND talented. This isn't fair."

I'd expected a simple mountain brute—the perfect anti-Langley to take my virginity and ruin me for a proper marriage in the eyes of Daddy Dearest. Instead, I'd found a man who could dismantle threats with the mind of a trained warrior but also created art that made my throat tighten.

Back to tidying, hoping the activity would help clear the tumult of emotions washing over me. By the time I finished, the cabin looked significantly less like a bear's seasonal residence. Progress on one front at least.

The sound of tires on gravel stopped me cold.

Bodhi returning early? The clock showed 10:43 AM.

But my hopes were quickly dashed when at the window, instead of Bodhi's battered truck I saw the same black Mercedes we'd spotted in town yesterday. My stomach immediately dropped.

Langley Richardson stepped out, looking nothing like the polished attorney from Atlanta.

His expensive clothes were wrinkled and dirt-stained, his normally perfect Ken-doll blonde hair disheveled.

Dark circles shadowed his eyes. He looked like he'd spent the night hunting through the wilderness—which, based on the watch Bodhi found, he probably had.

"Scarlett, darling!" His voice carried through the walls, pleasant but with that undercurrent I knew too well. "Your father's worried sick! This little adventure has gone on long enough!"

Like he cares about anything but his reputation.

I grabbed my phone. No signal, but I remembered finding a weak connection on the northeast corner of the porch. I typed quickly: SOS PSYCHO FIANCÉ HERE

The message showed the spinning wheel of non-delivery. I needed to hide.

Knocking began—firm, powerful but controlled. Pure Langley.

"Scarlett, I know you're in there." His voice hardened. "Your car is here. Open the door. We need to discuss your... behavior."

Footsteps crossed the porch. The doorknob rattled.

"Scarlett," his tone shifted, "don't be childish. I've driven all this way. The least you could do is show some gratitude."

The closet was my only option. I squeezed in among Bodhi's flannel shirts and heavy coats just as a sharp crack announced the front door giving way.

Slow breaths. Quiet breaths.

Surrounded by Bodhi's clothes, I inhaled his scent. It made me feel both safer and more terrified—safe because it reminded me of his strength, terrified because he

wasn't here.

"Scarlett?" Langley's voice echoed through the cabin. "What a... quaint accommodation you've found. Quite different from your father's estate."

Cabinet doors opened. Papers rustled. Drawers scraped.

"Everyone's devastated," he continued, coming closer. "Your father had to explain to the congregation why his daughter disappeared before her engagement announcement. The gossip has been... unfortunate."

Of course that's what he'd worry about.

"We've prepared a statement," his footsteps entered the bedroom. "Temporary emotional distress. Pre-wedding jitters. Nothing a few sessions with Dr. Atherton won't fix."

My phone vibrated silently—the text had gone through! No response from Bodhi, but at least the message delivered. I clutched it tightly.

"Interesting choice of men," Langley muttered nearby, his breathing quicker than normal. "Though I suppose a primitive lifestyle suits primitive tastes."

I pressed deeper into the closet. A hanger dug into my shoulder.

"Did you really think this would work?" His voice turned conversational as he moved around the bedroom. "That you could just vanish and play wilderness wife with some... what is he? A lumberjack? A survivalist?"

Something glass clinked against wood.

"What exactly was your plan? To hide out until you got bored? We both know you can't last a week without your spa appointments."

The closet door swung open.

Langley stood there, his smile cold. "Found you."

His hand grabbed my arm, yanking me forward. I stumbled, dropping my phone.

"Now, now, little lamb," he said, his fingers wrapping tightly around my arm. "Time to stop playing and return to your proper place."

I wrenched free, surprising both of us with my strength. "No, Langley. I'm not going anywhere with you."

His eyes narrowed, jaw working. "Don't be difficult. This wedding is happening. Your rebellion changes nothing."

"The engagement is off," I said, steadier than I felt. "I don't want to marry you. I don't care what our parents arranged, or what you want."

He moved closer, crowding me. A muscle twitched near his temple. "You don't get to make that decision."

"It's my life," I countered. "My choice."

His hand shot out, pinning me against the wall, his palm against my throat—not squeezing, just there. A warning.

"Your father gave me his blessing," he hissed, inches from my face. Scotch fumes washed over me. "Do you know how much I've invested in this relationship? The

connections I've made with your father's ministry?"

His hand trembled. Sweat dotted his forehead despite the cool room. His pupils had expanded, nearly swallowing the blue of his irises. The constant sniffing, the twitching jaw, the frenetic energy—it all clicked.

"You're high," I said quietly.

He laughed, sharp and hollow. "So judgmental, just like your father. At least I don't hide my vices behind a pulpit."

His hand tightened slightly. "Get your things. We're leaving."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I said, looking for anything I could use as a weapon.

"Yes, you are." His fist slammed the wall beside my head. "One way or another."

"Langley, stop it."

"Maybe fear will knock some sense into you," he snarled, facade gone. "Do you know what it took to find you? The investigator I hired? The locals I paid? Did you think my connections couldn't reach you here? No one makes a fool of me, Scarlett."

I glanced toward the door, measuring the distance.

"Don't even think about it," he warned. "There's nowhere to run. No one to help you. Your mountain man isn't coming to save you."

The rumble of Bodhi's truck engine cut through the tension.

Relief washed through me, then fear—what if Langley hurt Bodhi? Suddenly, I realized with heart-stopping clarity that somewhere between breakfast disasters and failed seductions, the man I'd planned to use had become someone I couldn't bear to lose.

“Mountain Man to the Rescue”

Bodhi

"Two, please. No, make it three," I told Danny, Flint's oldest son who was working the counter at Hawk's Nest Outfitters. I pointed at the security cameras on display. "And throw in those motion sensors, too."

"Planning to monitor wildlife?" Danny asked, scanning the items. At sixteen, he was already nearly as tall as his father, with the same mischievous glint in his eye.

I grunted noncommittally. The only wildlife I was concerned with was the guy who'd left his watch on my property.

My phone vibrated in my pocket—unusual this far into town where service was spotty at best. I pulled it out, expecting Flint asking if I wanted to grab lunch.

Instead, three words from Scarlett sent ice through my veins:

SOS PSYCHO FIANCÉ HERE

My training kicked in—the Ranger I thought I'd left behind in Afghanistan surfacing like he'd never been gone. I slapped cash on the counter, forgetting the change as I bolted for the door.

"Bodhi, your security cameras—"

"Keep them," I called over my shoulder, already sprinting toward my truck.

The engine roared to life, tires spitting gravel as I peeled out of the parking lot.

The road between town and my cabin had never seemed longer.

Every bend in the mountain pass was an obstacle, every second that passed was time Scarlett was alone with Langley—a man who'd tracked her across multiple states.

I pushed my truck beyond what its worn suspension could handle. Langley's appearance wasn't random. The black Mercedes we'd spotted in town, the expensive watch deliberately left where I'd find it—this wasn't desperation; this was calculation.

Five miles from home, I killed the engine and coasted the final stretch in neutral. I parked behind a stand of pines, grabbed the hunting knife from my glove compartment, and moved silently toward the cabin.

The black Mercedes was parked in my driveway like a challenge. Through the windshield, I could see no driver waiting—Langley was inside. With her.

My cabin came into view, front door splintered around the lock.

I circled to approach from the blind spot below the bedroom window, keeping to the shadows as I'd been trained.

Eight years in the Rangers hadn't been forgotten—my body moved automatically, each step silent despite the forest floor's tendency to announce every visitor with cracking twigs and rustling leaves.

Through the kitchen window, I caught a glimpse of movement—Scarlett backing away, hands raised defensively. Langley's voice carried through the cracked

window—measured, reasonable-sounding words delivered with an undertone of menace.

"...making a scene, darling. What will the congregation think? Your father had to explain your little breakdown to the church board. They're all praying for your...mental health."

I positioned myself by the back door, listening.

"I told you, Langley, I'm not coming back," Scarlett's voice was steady despite the fear I could hear beneath it. "The engagement is over. I don't care what my father promised you or your family."

"Oh, sweetheart," his voice dripped with condescension, "that's not how this works. Your father and mine have arrangements. Business arrangements that require our union. Your... feelings... aren't relevant to the larger picture."

A crash of something breaking, followed by Scarlett's gasp.

"Look what you made me do," Langley's voice hardened. "Always making me demonstrate my point. This is why you need guidance, Scarlett. Strong, firm guidance."

That was enough. I slipped through the back door, my footsteps silent on the wooden floor I'd laid with my own hands.

From the kitchen, I could see into the living room where Langley had Scarlett cornered.

His back was to me, but I could see the rigid set of his shoulders, the way his manicured hand gripped her arm hard enough to leave marks.

The perfect image he presented—expensive clothes, all-American good looks—stood in stark contrast to the shattered ceramic mug at his feet and the wild look in his eyes.

His movements were too quick, his speech too rapid.

The constant sniffing, the jaw clenching—classic signs of someone riding a cocaine high.

Just like Scarlett had suspected when she told me about him.

Great. Not just an entitled asshole, but a coked-out entitled asshole.

Scarlett's eyes found mine over his shoulder. The relief that flooded her face was quickly masked as she focused back on Langley, not giving away my presence.

I moved into position, calculating the cleanest takedown with minimal risk to Scarlett.

"I've already explained to your father how we'll handle this," Langley was saying, his fingers digging deeper into her arm.

"A few weeks at that private wellness center in Arizona.

Very discreet. They specialize in... adjusting attitudes.

By the time you come home, you'll be properly grateful for structure again. "

Scarlett's eyes widened in real fear. "You're talking about locking me up."

"I prefer to think of it as intensive pre-marital counseling," he smiled, the expression never reaching his eyes. "A reset. By the time we say our vows, you'll be the perfect

pastor's daughter again. The perfect wife."

"I think the lady already gave you her answer."

Langley whirled, keeping his grip on Scarlett, yanking her partially in front of him like a shield.

"Who the fuck are you?" His eyes narrowed, taking in my appearance with obvious disgust. "The mountain hobo she's been slumming with? This is a private conversation between my fiancée and me."

"Ex-fiancée," Scarlett corrected, attempting to twist free of his grip.

Langley's fingers dug deeper into her arm. "Semantics, darling. We both know how this ends."

I stepped forward, keeping my voice calm despite the fury building inside me. "Here's how this ends: You let her go and leave my property before I remove you. Your choice how that happens."

He laughed, a sound entirely devoid of humor. "Do you have any idea who I am? Who her father is? This little rebellion is cute, but it's over. Scarlett belongs with me, in Atlanta, fulfilling her obligations to her family and our community."

"I don't belong to anyone," Scarlett snapped, still struggling.

Langley's free hand shot out, grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking her head back. "The Richardson family doesn't just walk away from deals, sweetheart. Your father knows that. Why do you think he was so eager to make this match? My father practically owns half his church board."

I moved closer. "Let her go. Now."

"Or what?" Langley sneered. "You'll what, mountain man? I have the best attorneys in the Southeast. I'll bury you in lawsuits. Trespassing, kidnapping, assault—take your pick. By the time I'm done, you won't have this pathetic cabin or anything else."

"You broke into my property," I pointed out. "You're assaulting a woman who's clearly told you to leave. Your legal threats don't impress me."

His eyes darted between us, the cocaine making him even more erratic. "She's coming with me. Her father wants her home. The wedding is still happening. Too much depends on it."

"She's not going anywhere she doesn't want to go."

"You don't understand what you're interfering with!" His voice rose, desperation creeping in. "This union is about more than just marriage. The Montgomery-Richardson alliance means power. Influence. Money. Years of planning. I'm not letting some backwoods nobody ruin that."

"You know what's nice about living this far from civilization?" I asked, closing the final distance between us. "No witnesses."

Langley's expression flickered. "What?"

"Fun wilderness fact," I continued. "I can make your body disappear and feed you to bears before anyone knows you're missing."

His eyes darted toward the door, calculating escape routes. The confidence began to crack.

"You're threatening me," he said, voice rising. "That's assault."

"No," I corrected. "This is assault."

I moved faster than he could process, closing the distance between us.

One hand broke his grip on Scarlett's arm while the other executed a pressure point hold on his wrist that had him gasping in pain.

I spun him, using his own momentum against him, and had him face-down on the floor with his arm twisted behind his back before he could even shout.

"Scarlett," I said calmly, "the landline is on the kitchen counter. Call Mabel at the general store. Tell her to get the sheriff out here for a break-in and assault."

She nodded, backing away toward the kitchen, rubbing her arm where angry red marks were already forming.

"You can't do this," Langley wheezed beneath me, struggling ineffectively. "Do you know who my father is? The connections I have?"

"Out here?" I applied slightly more pressure, making him yelp. "Your connections mean less than bear scat. And I'd love to explain to the sheriff how you broke into private property to enforce your 'engagement' to a woman who clearly wants nothing to do with you."

Fifteen excruciatingly long minutes later, the sheriff's cruiser pulled up outside. The aging lawman took one look at the situation, sighed deeply, and pulled out his notepad.

"Another city slicker causing trouble, Wilder?" he asked, eyeing Langley with the

weary resignation of someone who'd seen too many tourists create problems.

"Breaking and entering, assault, and threats," I confirmed, finally releasing Langley but staying close enough to intervene if necessary. "And possibly stalking across state lines."

Langley immediately launched into a tirade about his rights, his family's importance, and how Scarlett was having a breakdown and needed to return to her family. The sheriff listened impassively, then held up a hand.

"Son, I don't care if your daddy is the President. You broke down a door on private property and put hands on a woman who doesn't want your attention. That's enough for me to take you in while we sort this out."

After taking statements and photographs of Scarlett's bruised arm and the broken door, the sheriff led a handcuffed and still-protesting Langley to his cruiser.

"I'll need you both to come in tomorrow to make formal statements," he told us. "And Miss Montgomery, might want to call your folks, let them know what's happened here. Seems there's been some miscommunication about your whereabouts and intentions."

When the cruiser disappeared down the mountain road, the silence felt oppressive. Scarlett stood in the center of the living room, arms wrapped around herself, looking smaller and more vulnerable than I'd seen her.

"You okay?" I asked, keeping my distance despite wanting to pull her into my arms.

She nodded, then shook her head, then let out a strangled laugh that sounded dangerously close to a sob. "I'm sorry I brought this to your door."

"Don't," I said firmly. "None of this is your fault."

"You don't understand," she whispered, sinking onto the couch. "I didn't tell you everything about what was happening with my family."

I sat beside her, leaving space between us. "I'm listening."

"My father's church had financial trouble last year—a scandal involving misappropriated funds," she explained, her voice hollow.

"Langley's father bailed them out, but it came with strings attached.

The biggest one being me." She looked up, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

"I knew about the arranged marriage part, but I didn't know they'd go this far.

That talk about a 'wellness center'—I think he was serious. "

"He's not taking you anywhere," I assured her. "Not without going through me first."

"Why are you helping me?" she asked suddenly, those green eyes searching my face. "I've brought nothing but trouble since I arrived."

"That's not all you've brought," I said.

"What else?"

I struggled for words, not my strongest skill at the best of times. "Life. Before you came, I was just... existing. Going through motions. You brought chaos, yes, but also..."

"Also?" she prompted when I trailed off.

"Light," I finally managed. "You brought light back to a place that had been dark too long."

Her eyes filled with tears, but a small smile curved her lips. "That's unexpectedly poetic for a man who communicates primarily in grunts."

"I have hidden depths," I deadpanned, relieved to see her smile widen.

"I've noticed," she said, moving closer until our thighs touched. "Thank you for coming when I needed you. For believing me."

"Always will," I promised, before I could consider the implications of 'always.' "No one touches what's mine."

The words hung between us, and I immediately backpedaled. "Not that you're mine. Or anyone's. People aren't possessions. Unless you want to be. Mine, that is. Not a possession." I scrubbed a hand over my face. "I should stop talking."

To my surprise, Scarlett laughed—not the practiced, artificial laugh she'd used when she first arrived, but something genuine that lit up her entire face despite the tear tracks on her cheeks.

"You're adorable when you're flustered," she said, leaning her head against my shoulder. "And for the record, I wouldn't mind being yours. In a completely equal, mutually exclusive way."

The knot that had been in my chest since reading her SOS text finally loosened. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"We'll figure this out," I promised. "I'm not letting him near you again."

"My hero," she murmured, but without the sarcasm that would have laced the words days ago.

She looked up at me then, her expression making my breath catch. Without makeup, her hair a mess, wearing my too-large flannel shirt she'd grabbed in her panic—she'd never looked more beautiful.

"I think I'm in trouble, Bodhi Wilder," she whispered.

"What kind of trouble?"

"The kind where I came here looking for an easy solution and found something much more complicated instead." Her fingers traced my jaw. "The kind where I might be falling for a mountain man who talks to chickens and threatens to feed my ex to wildlife."

"That is trouble," I agreed, turning to press a kiss to her palm. "Especially since that mountain man is definitely falling for you."

When our lips met this time, it wasn't the desperate passion of our earlier encounter. This was something deeper, something that felt dangerously close to a promise.

We had a long road ahead—legal battles, confrontations with her family, figuring out if a city girl and a reclusive military vet could actually build something real together.

But for the first time since she'd arrived in her mud-splattered BMW with designer luggage and impossible expectations, I allowed myself to hope.

Colonel chose that moment to appear at the window, pecking insistently at the glass

as if demanding a status update on the threat to his territory.

Scarlett broke the kiss with a laugh. "Your chicken is jealous."

"He'll adjust," I said, pulling her back into my arms. "We all will."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Roots and Wings”

Scarlett

The August sun beat down mercilessly as I dug my fingers into the rich mountain soil.

Sweat trickled between my shoulder blades, darkening the back of my once-white tank top that I'd sacrificed to the gardening gods.

A full week had passed since Langley's dramatic arrest, and I was still adjusting to this strange new reality—one where I wasn't constantly looking over my shoulder.

"You're supposed to plant them, not interrogate them," Bodhi called from where he was reinforcing the chicken coop.

I sat back on my heels, wiping dirt across my forehead with the back of my hand. "I'm having a philosophical discussion with these tomato plants about their life choices. They're very opinionated about soil pH."

His laugh—that rare, wonderful sound I'd been hearing more frequently—carried across the yard. Colonel pecked at the ground nearby, occasionally cocking his head to stare at me as if critiquing my gardening technique.

The restraining order against Langley had been issued yesterday.

According to the sheriff, he was still in custody pending bail hearings, with additional

charges likely forthcoming based on evidence found in his car—including detailed maps of Bodhi's property and what appeared to be a sedative kit that made my blood run cold.

My parents had been notified immediately. Their initial disbelief had quickly transformed into horror when confronted with the evidence of Langley's obsession and the Richardson family's carefully constructed facade of respectability.

I pressed the final tomato seedling into the ground, patting the soil around it with surprising tenderness. Gardening wasn't something I'd ever imagined enjoying, yet here I was, filthy and sweating, feeling oddly satisfied by the simple act of coaxing life from dirt.

"There," I told the plants firmly. "Grow or don't, but I've done my part. The rest is between you and Mother Nature."

My cell phone rang from where I'd set it on the garden bench.

After Langley's arrest, Bodhi had invested in a premium satellite internet system—a significant shift in his off-grid philosophy.

The security scare had pushed him to recognize the need for reliable communication with the outside world.

Now I had decent cell service even out here in the middle of nowhere.

I removed my gardening gloves and brushed dirt from my knees. The conversations with my parents had been evolving from awkward to cautiously hopeful, though we were all still navigating unfamiliar emotional territory.

I grabbed my phone, taking a deep breath before answering. "Hello?"

"Scarlett? Honey, it's Mom and Dad. We're on speakerphone." My mother's voice sounded strained but determined.

"Hi," I replied, perching on the garden bench. "How did the meeting go?"

A heavy sigh came from my father. "That's... that's what we wanted to talk to you about."

Something in his tone made me grip the phone tighter. "Is everything okay?"

"I've stepped down from the ministry," he said, the words seeming to cost him physically. "Effective immediately."

"You what?" I nearly dropped the phone. "But the church is your life!"

"No, Scarlett. You and your mother are my life. The church was my calling, but somewhere along the way, I confused God's work with my own ambitions." His voice broke slightly. "I let public opinion and financial pressure from donors like the Richardsons cloud my vision of what truly matters."

My mother's voice joined in, thick with emotion. "We both did, sweetheart. We were so focused on appearances that we couldn't see what was happening right in front of us."

"I don't understand," I said, genuinely confused. "Why step down? Why not just... do better?"

"Because I need to practice what I've preached for twenty years," my father explained.

"Humility. Repentance. Putting family before ambition."

" A pause. "And because I should have believed you about Langley's character the first time you expressed concerns.

Instead, I dismissed you and prioritized the Richardson donation checks.

That's not the action of a man fit to lead others spiritually. "

Tears pricked at my eyes. "Dad—"

"Please, let me finish." His voice steadied. "You're our only child, Scarlett. Our miracle. After seven years of trying and four miscarriages, when you came along, it was unexpected and felt like divine intervention. We were terrified of losing you, too."

"We hovered," my mother admitted quietly. "We worried. We tried to protect you from everything, including your own choices. But in doing so, we treated you like the child you no longer are instead of the capable woman you've clearly become."

A tear escaped, rolling down my cheek. "I just wanted you to see me. To hear me."

"We see you now," my father said, his voice stronger. "And we're asking for your forgiveness, and for time. We've made mistakes—terrible ones—but we love you, and we hope there's a path forward for our family."

"It's time for you to spread your wings and fly," my mother added. "Even if that means flying far from us for a while. We've done our job—better in some ways than others—but now your life is yours to live."

I caught myself smiling through the tears. "I'd like that. The time, I mean. I think we all need it."

After promises to speak again soon and tearful goodbyes, I hung up, feeling lighter than I had in years.

I wasn't naive enough to think everything was magically fixed, but for the first time, I felt like they were truly seeing me—not as an extension of themselves or the church, but as a person with her own path to walk.

The screen door creaked, and Bodhi appeared, hesitating at the threshold. "Everything okay?"

"My father stepped down from the ministry. He's... they're both trying to make amends. It's a start."

Bodhi crossed to where I sat, his calloused hand surprisingly gentle as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Takes courage to admit when you're wrong."

"Something we Montgomerys aren't exactly known for," I admitted with a watery laugh.

His gaze roamed over my face, lingering in a way that made my skin tingle despite my emotional state. "You've got..." He brushed his thumb across my cheekbone. "Dirt. Everywhere, actually."

"I was going for the 'one with nature' aesthetic." I glanced down at my filthy attire—my dirty tank top, torn jeans, mud-caked boots, and not a speck of makeup. My hair was piled in a messy bun that had more to do with practicality than style. "I'm sure I look like a disaster."

"You look beautiful," he said simply, with such conviction that my breath caught.

Our eyes locked, and the atmosphere between us changed. He was looking at me like

I was wearing La Perla lingerie instead of my dirt-covered clothes. The intensity in his gaze made my heart race, and I suddenly became acutely aware of how close we were standing.

"I should shower," I gestured toward the bathroom. "Plants have ways of making you pay tribute in soil form."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Use all the hot water you want. Solar tank's full."

Such a simple offering, yet in Bodhi's world of careful resource management, it felt significant—like being handed the keys to a Ferrari.

After a blissfully hot shower, I emerged to find Bodhi had started dinner—fresh trout from his promised "river delivery service" and vegetables from his established garden beds. We ate on the newly reinforced porch, watching the sunset paint the mountains in shades of gold and crimson.

As darkness settled, Bodhi built a fire in the stone pit he'd constructed near the cabin. The night air carried the scent of pine and wood smoke, the perfect antidote to the day's lingering heat. Stars emerged overhead, more brilliant than any Atlanta sky could offer.

I settled onto the log bench, wearing just a thin cotton dress against the still-warm evening air. He joined me, passing a mason jar of his homebrewed beer.

"What happens now?" he asked, his profile lit by the dancing flames.

I took a sip, considering. "I should probably figure that out. Go back to Atlanta. Or somewhere." The words felt empty even as I spoke them. "Start over."

"Or stay," he said quietly, not looking at me.

My heart stuttered. "Stay?"

"Here. With me." He poked at the fire with a stick, sending sparks spiraling upward.
"If you want."

"Bodhi—"

"I know it's not what you're used to," he continued, words coming faster now. "No fancy restaurants or shopping malls. But with the new satellite system, you'd at least have decent connection to the outside world. A chicken that judges your life choices. But..."

I waited, hardly daring to breathe.

He finally turned to me, firelight reflecting in his eyes. "These past days with you... even with all the chaos and danger... I've felt more alive than I have since before Afghanistan. You brought color back to a world I'd been seeing in grayscale."

"I set your kitchen on fire and broke your coffeemaker," I reminded him, deflecting with humor as emotion threatened to overwhelm me.

"You did," he agreed with a slight smile.

"You also stood up to your stalker ex-fiancé, planted tomatoes like you've been farming for years, and made me laugh for the first time in longer than I can remember.

" His hand found mine, fingers intertwining.

"I don't want to go back to silence when you leave. "

I stared at our joined hands, marveling at how right they looked together—my manicure-free fingers engulfed by his work-roughened ones.

"So..." I swallowed hard. "About that virginity situation. It's still... situated."

He choked on his beer, coughing as I patted his back with mock innocence.

"Scarlett," he said when he recovered, voice deeper than before. "That's not why I'm asking you to stay."

"I know." I met his gaze directly. "But it's a compelling fringe benefit."

His laugh rumbled through the night air. "You're impossible."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

"So I've been told." I set my jar aside, gathering courage from the stars above and the steady presence beside me. "But seriously, Bodhi... I think I'm falling for you too. And it terrifies me because I came here with such a different plan."

"Terrifies me too," he admitted. "I built this place to be alone. Now I can't imagine it without you complaining about the wifi and teaching Colonel bad habits."

I leaned closer, drawn to him like I'd been since I'd first seen him. "So what do we do about it?"

His gaze dropped to my lips. "Whatever you want. No pressure. No expectations."

"What if what I want is you?" I whispered. "All of you?"

His mouth found mine in a kiss that started gentle but quickly blazed into something hungry and desperate. His hands tangled in my hair, cradling my head like I might vanish if he didn't hold on tight enough.

I climbed into his lap, straddling him on the log bench, needing to be closer. His hands slid beneath my dress, finding bare skin at my waist, his touch igniting me despite the night air.

"Inside," he murmured against my neck. "Not having your first time on a splintery log."

Before I could respond, he stood, lifting me effortlessly. My legs wrapped around his waist as he carried me toward the cabin, our kiss unbroken.

"Is this the part where you throw me over your shoulder like a caveman?" I asked breathlessly when we finally paused for air.

His smile was gentle despite the hunger in his eyes. "No, this is the part where I carry you like something precious. The caveman part comes later."

The promise in those words sent a shiver of anticipation through me.

Inside, he carried me straight to his bedroom. Unlike the rest of the cabin, here the wilderness gave way to unexpected comfort: a massive bed with hand-carved posts dominated the space, covered in soft sheets that looked invitingly cool against the August heat.

He laid me down with reverent care, but I pulled him immediately after me, unwilling to lose contact even for a moment. His weight settled partly over me, deliciously solid and warm.

"Are you sure?" he asked, searching my eyes. "We can wait—"

"I've been trying to seduce you with fruit for days," I reminded him, tugging at his shirt. "If we wait any longer, I'll have to resort to vegetables, and nobody wants that."

He laughed, the sound vibrating through both our bodies, before his expression turned serious again. "I need to hear you say it, Scarlett."

"I'm sure," I said, meeting his gaze steadily. "I want this. I want you."

His kiss was slower this time, deeper, like he was memorizing the taste of me. Clothes fell away under patient hands—my dress lifting over my head, his shirt revealing the muscled expanse of his chest and shoulders, jeans and underwear until nothing remained between us.

I'd expected to feel self-conscious, but the way he looked at me—like I was something extraordinary—banished any insecurity. His eyes darkened as they traveled over my naked body, his breath catching visibly.

"You're perfect," he murmured, trailing his fingers along my collarbone, down between my breasts, over the curve of my hip.

I trembled beneath his touch, arching toward him instinctively. "Please don't make me wait anymore."

"Some things," he said, pressing a kiss to my neck, "deserve to be savored." Another kiss to my shoulder. "Explored." His mouth descended to my breast, tongue circling my nipple before taking it between his lips.

I gasped, fingers tangling in his hair as sensation spiraled through me.

My other breast received the same attention, his tongue and teeth working in tandem until both peaks were hard and sensitive.

Every gentle tug sent a corresponding pulse between my legs, building a pressure I'd never experienced.

"Bodhi," I breathed, not even sure what I was asking for.

His hand slid lower, tracing patterns on my inner thigh, coming tantalizingly close to where I needed him most before retreating. The teasing touches had me squirming beneath him, my hips lifting in silent plea.

"Patience," he whispered against my skin, trailing kisses down my stomach.

"Easy for you to say," I managed, my voice shaky. "You're not the one being

tortured."

His chuckle vibrated against my hip bone. "Trust me, this is torture for both of us."

His fingers finally found the wet heat between my legs, sliding through the slickness with a reverence that made me whimper. He explored unhurriedly, learning which touches made me gasp, which made me arch, which made me clutch at his shoulders.

When he finally circled my clit with his thumb, the jolt of pleasure was so intense I cried out, my back arching off the bed. He watched my face as he continued the gentle circles, his expression a mixture of hunger and wonder.

"So responsive," he murmured, leaning down to kiss me deeply as his fingers continued their exploration. "So beautiful."

He slid one finger inside me, then a second, stretching me gently as his thumb maintained its maddening circles.

I'd touched myself before, of course, but nothing had prepared me for how different it felt to have someone else's hands on me, in me—especially when that someone knew exactly what they were doing.

"That feels..." I struggled to find words as pleasure built in waves.

"Tell me," he encouraged, curling his fingers inside me to find a spot that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

"Oh god," I gasped, my hips moving instinctively against his hand. "Right there."

He repeated the motion, adding more pressure, watching my reactions with an intensity that was almost as arousing as his touch. I felt myself climbing toward

something immense, something that both terrified and beckoned me.

When his mouth moved lower, replacing his thumb with his tongue, I nearly came undone on the spot. The wet heat of him against my most sensitive flesh was overwhelming. He tasted me thoroughly, using the flat of his tongue in broad strokes before focusing with devastating precision on my clit.

"Bodhi," I gasped, torn between pulling away and pushing closer as the pleasure built to almost unbearable heights. "I'm going to—I can't—"

"You can," he murmured against me, his fingers still working inside me as his tongue circled my clit. "Let go, Scarlett. I've got you."

The combination of his fingers curling inside me, his tongue circling my clit, and his eyes watching me with such intensity pushed me over the edge.

The orgasm crashed through me with unexpected force, waves of pleasure radiating outward as I cried out his name.

He worked me through it gently, easing only when I collapsed against the mattress.

As I struggled to catch my breath, he moved back up my body, kissing me deeply. The taste of myself on his lips was startlingly intimate, erotic in a way I hadn't anticipated.

"That was..." I searched for words.

"Just the beginning," he promised, reaching toward the bedside drawer.

I caught his wrist. "My turn first."

His eyebrows rose in surprise, but he didn't resist as I pushed at his shoulders, encouraging him onto his back. The reversal of positions gave me my first unobstructed view of him fully naked—all sculpted muscle and tan skin, his cock hard and impressive against his stomach.

I settled between his legs, momentarily uncertain despite my boldness. "You'll have to guide me."

His hand brushed my cheek. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," I insisted. "Just... tell me if I do something wrong."

I wrapped my hand around him experimentally, marveling at the contrast of smooth skin over hardness. His sharp intake of breath encouraged me to stroke from base to tip, learning the feel of him.

"Like this?" I asked, watching his face.

"Perfect," he managed, voice strained. "Just like that."

Emboldened, I lowered my head, maintaining eye contact as I took him into my mouth. His groan was immediate and deeply satisfying, his hand coming to rest gently on my head without applying pressure.

"Yes," he breathed as I experimented with pressure and rhythm. "God, Scarlett."

I'd worried about technique, but his reactions guided me—the catch in his breathing when I swirled my tongue around the head, the tensing of his thighs when I took him deeper, the increasingly desperate sounds as I found a rhythm that had his hips lifting slightly to meet me.

When his hand tightened in my hair, gently pulling me up, I resisted briefly.

"Stop," he rasped. "Or this ends much sooner than I want."

I released him with a final, teasing lick that made him groan again, pleased with myself. He pulled me up for a bruising kiss.

"Last chance to change your mind," he said gruffly, his forehead against me.

In answer, I straddled him, positioning myself above him. His hands settled on my hips, guiding me as I sank down slowly, taking him inch by inch. There was pressure, a brief sharp pain that made me gasp, then a feeling of incredible fullness as he filled me completely.

"Okay?" he asked, his face strained with the effort of remaining still.

I took a deep breath, adjusting to the new sensation. "Better than okay."

His hands guided my hips in a gentle rhythm as I began to move, finding what felt good. The discomfort faded quickly, replaced by building pleasure as I discovered the angle that made sparks shoot through my veins.

"That's it," he encouraged, one hand sliding between us to circle my clit as I rode him. "So beautiful."

The combination of his touch, his words, and the fullness of him inside me quickly had me climbing toward another peak. My movements grew more urgent, less coordinated as I chased the sensation.

"Bodhi," I gasped, "I'm close—"

In one fluid motion, he flipped us, maintaining our connection as he settled above me. My legs wrapped around his waist as he began to thrust more deeply, hitting a spot inside me that had me seeing stars.

"Come for me again," he urged, his rhythm increasing as his control frayed. "Want to feel you."

His words pushed me over the edge, my second orgasm even more intense than the first as I clenched around him. He followed moments later with a guttural groan, his hips jerking against mine as he found his release.

We collapsed together, limbs entangled, hearts racing in tandem. He was careful not to crush me, but kept me close as we caught our breath.

Afterward, he returned to gather me against his chest, pulling the soft sheet over our cooling bodies. I nestled into him, feeling strangely at home in this wild man's arms.

"Okay?" he asked quietly, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"Mmm," I mumbled sleepily. "More than. Though I may never move again."

His chuckle rumbled beneath my ear. "That would be convenient. Keep you right here where I can see you."

"Possessive much?" I teased, but secretly thrilled at the implication.

"Only of things that matter," he replied, his arms tightening around me.

As sleep began to claim me, I realized with perfect clarity that somewhere between fire extinguisher disasters and banana seductions, this cabin had become more home to me than anywhere I'd ever lived.

And this man—this gruff, tender mountain hermit who talked to chickens and carried me like I was precious—had claimed a piece of my heart I suspected I'd never get back.

For someone who'd come to Promise Ridge to lose her virginity and gain independence, I'd found something far more valuable: a place to belong, exactly as I was.

"Stay," he whispered against my hair, already half-asleep himself.

"I'm not going anywhere," I promised, meaning it more than he could know.

In his arms, I drifted off to the chorus of night sounds through the open window—crickets chirping, an owl's distant call, and the steady rhythm of Bodhi's heart beneath my cheek. For the first time in my life, I felt completely, authentically free.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Mountain Man Tamed”

Bodhi

I woke to the unfamiliar but oddly right weight of another human using my chest as a pillow.

Scarlett's hair was spread across me like a wildfire, her breath warm against my skin.

In the early morning light filtering through the window, I could see a small damp spot where she'd been drooling slightly in her sleep.

Something about that tiny imperfection made my chest tighten.

She wasn't performing now, wasn't trying to seduce me—just sleeping, vulnerable and real.

My instinct for years had been to wake before dawn, to check the perimeter, to start the day with silent vigilance.

But for the first time since Afghanistan, I felt no urgency to move.

The cabin was secure. Colonel would sound the alarm if anyone approached.

And the woman in my arms needed rest after last night's .. activities.

Last night. The memory sent heat coursing through me again.

I'd been with women before, but never like that—never with someone who looked at me like I was her entire world while I was inside her.

Never with someone whose pleasure became more important than my own.

Never with someone I wanted to wake up beside.

She stirred, nestling closer, one leg sliding between mine in her sleep. The movement brought her thigh against me, and I stifled a groan. No need to wake her just because my body had ideas.

Too late. Her eyes fluttered open, momentary confusion giving way to a slow, sleepy smile that made something in my chest crack open like spring ice on the lake.

"Morning," she mumbled, voice rough with sleep. Then her eyes widened as she realized the dampness on my chest. "Oh god, I drooled on you. Smooth, Scarlett."

I laughed, the sound rusty but genuine. "I've survived worse. At least yours smells better than Colonel's."

She pushed herself up, looking adorably disheveled. Her hair was a tangled mess, her lips still slightly swollen from our kisses, a small bruise forming where I'd gotten carried away on her collarbone. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"How do you feel?" I asked, suddenly concerned about potential soreness after her first time.

She stretched like a cat, seemingly cataloging sensations. "Like I've discovered muscles I didn't know existed." A mischievous smile spread across her face. "And like I want to use them again."

Before I could respond, she leaned down to kiss me, morning breath be damned. The hesitancy from last night was gone, replaced by a confidence that was intoxicating. She straddled me fully, her body golden in the morning light, all inhibition vanished.

"Someone's feeling bold," I managed, my hands settling on her hips.

"Consider it practical application of last night's lessons," she replied, grinding against me in a way that made rational thought impossible. "I'm a quick study."

"Scarlett," I warned, my control already fraying. "You might be sore—"

"Then we'll go slow," she whispered, rising up slightly to position herself. "Or you'll just have to let me set the pace."

She sank down on me with deliberate slowness, her eyes never leaving mine as she took me inside her. The sensation of her tight heat engulfing me again almost ended things embarrassingly quickly. I gripped the sheets to keep from grabbing her hips and driving upward.

"Still okay?" I asked through gritted teeth once she'd taken all of me.

Her answer was to begin moving, finding a rhythm that had both of us panting within moments. She planted her hands on my chest for balance, her confidence growing with each roll of her hips. The sight of her above me, taking her pleasure so openly, was the most erotic thing I'd ever witnessed.

"You're incredible," I told her, unable to keep the reverence from my voice.

She laughed breathlessly. "Far from it. But this—" she rotated her hips in a way that made us both gasp, "—this feels right."

I reached up to cup her breasts, thumbs circling her nipples until they hardened to tight peaks. Her movements became more urgent, less coordinated. When I slid a hand between us to circle her clit, she threw her head back with a cry that probably startled Colonel halfway across the property.

Her enthusiasm increased as she chased her pleasure, rocking against me with abandon. In her exuberance, she shifted backward, knocking into the bedside table. The lamp wobbled precariously before crashing to the floor with a sound that would have had me reaching for my rifle any other morning.

Neither of us paused. If anything, the minor destruction spurred her on. I sat up to meet her, changing the angle and drawing a string of curses from her that would make even Mabel blush. With newfound leverage, I drove upward, meeting her thrust for thrust.

"Bodhi," she gasped, her inner walls beginning to tighten around me. "I'm going to—"

"Come for me baby," I urged, echoing my words from last night. "Come all over my hard cock."

She shattered with a cry of my name, her entire body trembling.

The sight of her coming undone pushed me over the edge, my release hitting with an intensity that left me seeing stars.

We clung to each other through the aftershocks, her forehead pressed against mine, our breathing gradually slowing in tandem.

"I think I broke your lamp," she finally murmured, glancing at the wreckage beside the bed.

"Worth it," I replied without hesitation.

She laughed, sliding off me and stretching luxuriously. As she stood, her foot caught the corner of an old wooden chair, sending it toppling to join the lamp on the floor.

"Are you trying to destroy my cabin from the inside out?" I asked, propping myself up on my elbows to watch her move through the morning light.

She flashed me a wicked grin over her shoulder. "Consider it renovation by motivation. Fix this table, get rewarded with what happens on top of it." She paused in the doorway. "I'm going to shower. Join me if you want... or I can leave you some hot water for once."

She disappeared down the hall, and a moment later I heard the water start. I stared at the ceiling, a ridiculous smile spreading across my face. This woman was going to be the death of me, and I couldn't bring myself to care.

By the time we finally emerged from a shower that had involved significantly more activity than just getting clean, the morning was well advanced.

I walked into the kitchen to find Scarlett already there, wearing a silky emerald camisole and matching shorts from one of her designer suitcases—the expensive loungewear looking amusingly out of place against my rustic kitchen backdrop.

"I want to help with breakfast," she announced, eyeing the kitchen with determination. "Nothing complicated. I'm not trying to burn down your cabin twice."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, pulling out a cast iron skillet for the venison sausage I'd been saving.

She spotted the loaf of bread on the counter and brightened. "I can make cinnamon

toast. My grandmother used to make it for me when I was little—it's the only thing I've ever been able to replicate without disaster. Even I can't mess up butter, cinnamon, and sugar on bread."

I smiled at her enthusiasm. "Toast it is. The toaster's temperamental, though. You have to press the lever down twice to get it to stay."

While I browned the sausage and fried some eggs from yesterday's collection, Scarlett battled with the ancient toaster, cursing under her breath when it rejected her first two attempts. Her look of triumph when she finally managed to get it working was worth every bit of the struggle.

She buttered the toast with intense concentration, then carefully sprinkled the cinnamon-sugar mixture she'd found in my spice cabinet.

"My grandmother used to say cinnamon toast could cure anything from a cold to a broken heart," she explained, arranging the slices on plates with surprising care.

"It was our special breakfast whenever I stayed with her.

She said every woman should know how to make at least one thing that brings comfort.

" She smiled, a softer expression than her usual confident grin. "It's my one culinary achievement."

The simple breakfast was perfect—the sweet cinnamon toast balancing the savory sausage and eggs. We sat on the porch steps to eat, watching the morning sun climb over the mountains.

"So," she said between bites, "what happens now?"

The question settled between us. Last night had been about need, about connection that couldn't be denied. This morning was about choice.

"Honestly? I don't know," I admitted, setting my plate aside. "I've never done this before."

"Sex? Because evidence suggests otherwise," she teased, but I could see the vulnerability behind her smile.

"No," I said, taking her hand. "This. Wanting someone to stay."

Her expression softened. "What are you afraid of?"

I sighed, meeting her gaze directly. "That you'll get bored. That you'll wake up one day and realize mountain life isn't what you signed up for. That you'll miss civilization."

"You mean boutique shopping and valet parking?" She traced my jawline with her finger. "I've spent twenty-four years being who everyone else wanted me to be. Do you know how freeing it is to be who I want? Even if that person apparently enjoys outhouses and a judgmental rooster?"

I couldn't help smiling at that, but uncertainty still gnawed at me. "What about work? Family? Friends? A real life?"

"I have a marketing degree gathering dust and an impressive portfolio of social media management for my father's church," she said, surprising me. "With that satellite internet you installed, I could easily work remotely. I've already started looking at opportunities."

"You have?"

She nodded. "And as for family... I need time with mine, but not proximity. Maybe in the fall we could visit? You can come exactly as you are. They'd be absolutely terrified of a man who can survive without a personal assistant."

The image of me sitting in Reverend Montgomery's living room, looking like Bigfoot's slightly better groomed cousin, among their polished marble and designer furniture, made me snort. "Your father would have a heart attack."

"He's tougher than he looks," she said, suddenly serious. "And he owes me the courtesy of accepting my choices after everything that happened with Langley."

I kissed her then, unable to believe this incredible woman wanted to build a life here, with me.

"We'll figure it out," I promised. "One day at a time."

After breakfast, Scarlett insisted on showing me something she'd discovered yesterday while I was working on the deck. She led me down a small path behind the cabin, her hand in mine, excitement radiating from her.

"There," she said, pointing proudly to a wild raspberry patch I'd forgotten existed. "I found them yesterday when I was collecting eggs. The hens kept trying to follow me here."

The bushes were laden with ripe berries, deep red and ready for picking. She'd already collected a small basketful, and showed me where she'd carefully marked the boundaries with sticks.

"For preserves," she explained. "Or maybe just eating straight. I've never picked wild berries before."

The simple joy in her voice over something I'd taken for granted for years made me see my own property through new eyes. What else had I missed or forgotten while focused on mere survival?

By late afternoon, I'd returned to the deck project—fixing the final posts that would complete the expansion I'd been working on for months.

Scarlett sat nearby with her laptop, occasionally reading me job descriptions that made us both laugh at their corporate buzzwords.

Every so often, she'd wander over to the chicken coop, where she'd somehow managed to befriend even the most skittish hen in my small flock.

"I think I'm going to name this one Prudence," she called, gently stroking a speckled brown hen. "She reminds me of my mother—constantly fussing but secretly affectionate."

As the sun began its descent behind the mountains, I drove in the final nail and stepped back to survey my work.

"Finished," I announced, wiping sweat from my brow.

Scarlett set aside her computer and came to stand beside me, her arm slipping around my waist. "It's beautiful, Bodhi. You built this entirely yourself?"

Pride swelled in my chest—not just for the deck, but for the whole life I'd carved out of this mountain. A life that now seemed less like a fortress and more like a home.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand and leading her up the new steps to stand on the deck. "Best view on the property."

We stood together as the setting sun painted the mountains in fiery gold and deep purple, the sky ablaze with colors no city skyline could match. Colonel strutted importantly across the yard below us, his feathers catching the dying light.

"I don't know where this is going," I said quietly, my arm around her shoulders. "I'm not good at planning beyond the next season. But I know I want you here, Scarlett. Not as a mail-order bride or a temporary escape, but as yourself. However long that lasts."

She turned in my arms, her eyes reflecting the sunset. "I came here looking for freedom from my past. I didn't expect to find a future I actually wanted." She rose on tiptoes to kiss me softly. "I'm staying, Bodhi. For as long as you'll have me."

"Might be a while," I warned, tightening my arms around her. "I'm stubborn that way."

"Good thing I'm equally stubborn," she replied with a smile that made my heart stutter. "We'll figure out the rest as we go."

As the first stars appeared overhead, I held this unexpected gift of a woman and felt something I hadn't experienced in years—peace. Not the empty silence of isolation, but the quiet certainty of having found exactly where, and with whom, I belonged.

Colonel crowed from somewhere near the chicken coop, as if offering his reluctant approval.

"See?" Scarlett laughed against my chest. "Even your rooster agrees we're a match."

"He's always had good taste," I said, surprising myself with how easily the words came. "But he's still sleeping outside."

The mountain air cooled around us as darkness fell, but neither of us moved to go inside. Some moments deserve to be lived fully, memorized perfectly. This was one of them—the night we both stopped running and started building something real, one day at a time.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:02 am

“Full Circle”

Scarlett

Early December in the Colorado mountains was no joke.

The first real snowfall had transformed Bodhi's wilderness sanctuary into a scene straight from a storybook winter.

Four months after my dramatic arrival, I was still discovering new things to love about mountain life—like the way snow dampened all sound in the forest, or how morning sunlight turned ordinary frost into diamonds.

I tapped away at my laptop in what used to be the Raccoon Suite, now my office with its view of snow-capped pines.

The satellite internet connection Bodhi had installed after the Langley incident had proven its worth.

After three weeks of remote job hunting, I'd landed a position with Heartland Harvest, a digital marketing agency focusing exclusively on small farms and local food producers.

My current project involved creating an Instagram strategy for a family-owned maple syrup operation in Vermont.

"Boosting engagement by thirty percent," I muttered, reviewing my analytics. "Take

that, corporate sugar brands."

The front door opened with a blast of cold air, followed by the familiar sound of Bodhi stomping snow from his boots. He'd been in town helping Mabel reinforce her storage shed before the next snowstorm hit.

"How's the maple campaign?" he asked, appearing in my doorway with a paper bag that smelled like Mabel's cinnamon rolls.

I saved my work and spun to face him. "Converting the masses to artisanal breakfast condiments, one hashtag at a time."

He laughed, the sound still rare enough to make me pause and appreciate it. The semi-feral mountain man who'd greeted me with suspicion four months ago had softened around the edges—not tamed, exactly, but more willing to share his territory.

"Mabel says dinner at Flint and Josie's is still on for tonight," he said, setting the bag on my desk. "Weather's holding until tomorrow."

"Like wild horses could keep Josie from hosting," I replied, reaching for a cinnamon roll. "She's been planning this dinner since we missed their Halloween party."

"Probably announcing another baby," Bodhi suggested, leaning against the doorframe.

"I doubt it. Josie swore after the twins that she was done expanding the Hawthorne empire.

" I took a bite, not bothering with the dainty manners my mother had drilled into me since childhood.

"Besides, she's been asking weird questions about our cabin layout.

I think she's plotting some kind of renovation ambush. "

He watched me with a half-smile. "You have cinnamon on your chin."

"Goes with the powdered sugar on my shirt," I replied, making no move to fix either situation. The old Scarlett—the pastor's perfect daughter—would have been mortified. The new Scarlett, mountain woman in training, had better things to worry about.

Bodhi had changed too. His beard was still formidable but now slightly trimmed.

He ventured into town regularly without looking like he was plotting mass destruction.

Most surprisingly, when we'd visited my parents in October, he'd managed actual conversation with my father that didn't end in thinly veiled theological debates.

The visit had gone better than I'd expected.

My father, humbled by his resignation and the Richardson scandal, had made genuine efforts to connect with Bodhi.

My mother, while still sliding me the occasional brochure for Atlanta-based jobs, had at least stopped suggesting that mountain living was a "phase" I'd outgrow.

"What time did Josie say dinner was?" Bodhi asked, breaking into my thoughts.

"Six," I replied, licking frosting from my fingers. "Which gives us several hours to kill."

The gleam in his eyes told me exactly how he thought we should spend that time. Some things definitely hadn't changed.

"To friends and second chances!" Josie declared, raising her glass. The six of us—Flint and Josie, Bodhi and me, and the Kovacs, Mabel and her husband Harvey—clinked glasses across the dinner table.

Their home embodied organized chaos—children's artwork covering the walls, half-finished projects on every surface, and the constant background noise of their younger kids playing somewhere upstairs.

It couldn't have been more different from the sterile perfection of my parents' home, yet it felt infinitely more authentic.

"And to successful matchmaking," Flint added with a wink in our direction. "I should've charged you a finder's fee, Wilder."

Bodhi snorted. "I should charge you for emotional distress."

"Right," Flint scoffed. "Because you're clearly suffering, sharing your cabin with a beautiful woman who can actually stand your moods."

"He still refuses to wear slippers indoors," I stage-whispered. "And Colonel has better social skills."

Everyone laughed, including Bodhi, who squeezed my knee under the table.

These dinners had become a regular occurrence—this found family accepting me without question into their tight-knit circle.

The irony wasn't lost on me that I'd found more genuine connection in this tiny mountain town than in my father's megachurch with thousands of congregants.

"Speaking of matchmaking," Flint continued, setting down his glass with a theatrical flourish. "I've been thinking of expanding my business ventures."

Josie rolled her eyes fondly. "Here we go."

"Mountain Mates: The Flint Hawthorne Method!" He spread his hands like he was revealing a billboard. "One hundred percent success rate so far!"

"Your sample size is one couple," Mabel pointed out dryly.

"Quality over quantity, Mabel," Flint countered. "Besides, I've got a knack for seeing what people need before they know they need it."

"Like that time you decided Harvey needed a pet snake?" Josie reminded him.

Harvey shuddered visibly. "Still finding shed skin in my workshop."

Dinner continued with easy conversation and frequent laughter. By the time we drove back to the cabin, the night sky was a blanket of stars, the air crisp enough to see our breath.

Bodhi and I settled on the deck he'd finished back in August, bundled in blankets against the December chill. The mountains loomed dark against the star-studded sky, and somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled.

"I should check on the hens once more," Bodhi said, but made no move to get up from where we were cuddled together on the outdoor loveseat he'd built.

"They're fine," I assured him. "Colonel's probably got them all doing perimeter

checks and security drills."

He chuckled, pulling me closer. "We need to finalize our Christmas plans. Your mother's called twice this week to confirm dates."

"I know. She's already planning which church ladies to scandalize with stories of my mountain man husband."

The word slipped out before I could catch it. Husband. We hadn't discussed marriage, not once in our whirlwind months together. Bodhi went still beside me, and I felt heat rush to my face.

"I didn't mean—" I started, backpedaling frantically. "It's just what my mother calls you. Not that I think we're—I mean, we haven't—"

"Scarlett," he interrupted my stammering, shifting to face me. "Stop talking."

"Stopping," I agreed, mortified.

To my surprise, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small velvet box, its dark blue fabric worn with age.

"I was waiting for the right moment," he said, voice gruff. "But since you brought it up..."

My breath caught as he slid from the loveseat to one knee in front of me, snow crunching beneath him.

"I've been carrying this around for two weeks," he admitted, opening the box to reveal a vintage emerald ring set in white gold that I'd admired in Mabel's display case when we'd first visited town together. I'd thought he hadn't noticed my lingering gaze.

I couldn't speak as he took my hand.

"I'm not good with words," he continued. "But I know what I want, Scarlett. A life with you, here in these mountains or wherever we end up."

"Bodhi—"

"Marry me," he said simply. "Be my wife, for real this time. No mail-order schemes, no escape plans. Just us, together."

"Yes," I whispered, then louder, "Yes!"

The ring fit perfectly as he slid it onto my finger. When he kissed me, I tasted forever on his lips.

Later, as we lay tangled together in the bed we now shared without question, I thought about the strange, winding path that had led me here.

I'd come to Promise Ridge to lose my virginity and gain independence from my family's expectations.

I'd found so much more—strength I never knew I had, work that fulfilled me, and a love I'd never dared imagine existed.

"What are you thinking about?" Bodhi asked, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on my bare shoulder.

"About how badly my plan backfired," I murmured against his chest.

"Which plan was that?"

"The one where I was supposed to seduce you, lose my virginity, and move on with

my independent life," I admitted. "Instead, I got stuck with a mountain man, a judgmental rooster, and a forever kind of love."

"Terrible outcome," he agreed solemnly. "My condolences."

I propped myself up to look at him. "Best failure of my life."

Snow began to fall outside our window, but inside, wrapped in Bodhi's arms with his ring on my finger, I'd never felt warmer or more certain. My grand escape plan had succeeded after all—just not in any way I could have predicted. I'd escaped into exactly where I was meant to be all along.