

Kissed by the Outlaw

By

Kira Barcelo

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Chapter One

Kelly Long missed reading *The New York Post* in the mornings with her coffee and muffin. She missed walking through Greenwich Village and, insane as it was, she missed mass transportation. Or "mass trans" as it was better known in the tri-state area.

Driving to work, or wherever the heck she needed to go, had lost its novelty quickly. Getting stuck in traffic on I-77 in route to Charlotte had taken care of that. At least, when she didn't have to do the driving, back when she worked in the city, she could read all the way to work. Then, once off the bus and train, she could walk the rest of the way. She simply wasn't getting as much exercise anymore.

However, that morning she was trying to remedy that problem. She used one of the empty picnic tables near the parking lot to do her stretching first. It was eight o'clock on that Saturday morning, so she was off to a good start. Her plan was to drop the eight pounds she'd gained since her move to North Carolina half a year earlier. She had tried to slim down before, but this time, with the combination of a healthy diet and exercise, those eight pounds were going to definitely be history.

Kelly retied one of her sneaker laces, telling herself her move from Hoboken, New Jersey, wasn't only to blame for her weight gain. There was a worse reason for that, one that she didn't want to think about that right now.

That was another promise she'd made to herself—no more dwelling on the past. Was her philandering, self-centered ex putting on weight and losing sleep over their divorce?

Absolutely not. He was living it up with the new woman in his life, that snotty-thirteen-year-old-in-a-thirty-year-old's body. Mick was in the best shape he'd been in for years, all in his quest to keep up with his skinny, little honey.

That was all right. Kelly was over him—had been over him for some time now. She steadfastly refused to waste any more time on yesterday. From that day forward, she was done with the past. There was nothing in the past for her. Up and onward with the present and the future, which she was confident looked brighter than ever.

"Great day for a hike, huh?" a woman asked, briskly walking past with her daughter, a petite teenager.

"Yes, it is! Enjoy!" Kelly called after them with a friendly wave.

In all honesty, she was a new hiker. Very new. As in, this was the first time in all her forty-two years that she'd ever been on a mountain at all, let alone attempting to climb it.

Her coworker had assured her that this was the best trail, the one closest to the ranger station. Four miles round trip, a bit steep here, and lots of markers along the way to ensure she didn't get lost along the way. But nothing scary, nothing to land her in the next morning's paper, with the added bonus of a breathtaking view at the top.

"It's really a great workout, Kelly," her colleague had told her. "You'll love it. And you'll see the results on the scale if you go a couple times a week, if you can swing it."

Excellent. She was all about results, she told herself, as she patted her walking companion's head.

"Ready to go, Mimi?" she asked the tiny toy poodle. "Let's do this, girl!"

Strapped to her back was her backpack—not a serious hiker's pack, but a cute, cloth one she'd gotten on sale at Target. Or Tar-jay, as she affectionately called it. That was fine. Two water bottles fit in there, plus her cell, her keys, and a granola bar, just in case she got hungry along the way.

What Kelly hadn't thought to bring was a camera. That early November morning, she'd worn comfortable black leggings and a T-shirt, slipping on a gray hoodie jacket. Comfortable and warm for the cool of the day, which she took in as she did the distinctive and rustic colors of autumn. As it was, she stopped occasionally along the winding, pebble-strewn trail to take pictures with her phone's camera.

"Sure can't get *this* in the city," she said out loud, tucking her phone back into her jacket pocket and bringing out her water.

To her amusement, Mimi had taken advantage of the break to seat herself primly on a large, nearby rock.

"What? A break so soon, girl?" her master asked. "We've hardly broken a sweat, you and me. But, okay. Don't want to overdo it our first day...."

In actuality, she had perspired a little. Not too much, but she had been on the trail for a good half hour. Some parts were steep, some took even more effort and energy out of her.

All in all, though, she wasn't doing too badly. Being out in the woods was scenic and peaceful, and hands down, it absolutely beat trudging aimlessly on a treadmill at the gym any

day. For a former city girl, she was enjoying the hike more than she initially thought she would. Kelly was looking forward to that gorgeous view, the payoff for making it to the mountaintop. Seated beside her pet, she sipped cool water. Something out the corner of her eye caught her attention.

Another trail? Was that what that was? Crystal, her coworker, had told her there were eight trails in total on that mountain. Some more strenuous trails than others, some more traveled. She frowned, staring at it. It didn't look as well defined as the one she was currently taking.

A strong breeze whispered around her, rustling the leaves on the trees. The motion shook loose several crimson leaves that glided down in a graceful dance to the ground. Kelly looked behind her again and blinked several times, trying to clear her vision.

Perhaps it was the sunlight forming those glistening lights that appeared to be blinking above the rough, pebble-strewn trail beyond the rocks. There was movement in the brush a moment before a delicate, spotted deer lightly stepped out into the middle of the trail. The creature saw Kelly at the same exact time Mimi decided to bark, frightening the poor little thing away.

"Oh, now, girl—that was rude!" Kelly scolded the poodle and scrambled to her feet. She reached into her pocket for her cell phone. "Let's see if he didn't get too far. Maybe I can get a picture of him..."

As a "girly-girl," the term her mother had affectionately used to describe her, Kelly had never been camping, either. She still knew enough not to wander off the beaten path, at least when it came to the woods. She could only imagine how humiliating that would be, to show up at work on Monday after the local news reported that park rangers and helicopters and whatnot had been sent out to search for the forty-something, first-time (and clueless) hiker on that mountain.

Supposedly, there was also wildlife out there in addition to a shy deer. Among the animals were black bears, which she'd been told weren't dangerous and rarely approached humans. Kelly had no desire to end up on the Discovery Channel, just in case.

There was no cause for concern. The main trail, used also by the rangers to take their trucks up and down, was still in sight. She hadn't gone very far. The same couldn't be said of the deer, now nowhere in sight, much to Kelly's disappointment. From somewhere she could hear

water running. She'd been hearing it for a few minutes. She happened to catch sight of the cascade several feet away. A lovely, sparkling cascade, only a short walk off the path.

"See what happens when you do get off the beaten path, girl?" Kelly was delighted and gave Mimi's leash a gentle tug. "We would have missed that!"

The waterfall was surely photo-worthy. She almost reached it when she saw the lights flickering again, first through the trees, and then all around the cascade.

Standing at her master's feet, Mimi whimpered. The dog seemed restless, distressed. Kelly bent down and swept her tiny body up in her arms.

"Why are you being such a scaredy-cat, Meems? You're usually fearless."

The same could have been said for her. What was it with that place, with those strange lights? For the reason that odder things had happened, she looked around to see if anyone was hiding and somehow reflecting those lights. That didn't seem to be the case. Even more unusual, that part of the woods was giving off the weirdest vibe.

That was when she noticed what looked like a small cave right behind the cascade. Anything could have been in there, meaning she wasn't about to go playing explorer. It was time to get back to the trail and continue her trek up the mountain. There were still lots of calories to be burned, after all, and enough pounds to be sheared off her figure.

As she turned to leave, it became upsettingly apparent that she had gotten too close to the water. The rocks and ground beneath her feet gave way, causing her to lose her footing. After a brief struggle to grab for a trim limb, Kelly missed entirely and landed in the water, startled poodle and all. The cold water instantly chilled her.

Swearing, she floundered in the water. Apparently, it was deeper than it looked, probably reaching as high as her hips, if she could ever make it to her feet. Mimi was beginning to float away with the current, in the direction of the cascade and the cave beneath it, her bark filled with fear.

"Mimi, it's okay—Mommy's got you!" Kelly tried to grab at the leash but it floated out of her reach.

How did this happen? Only you could try to get a picture and drown your dog in the process, she berated herself. Her cell, tucked hastily into her pants' waistband, had to be damaged by now.

That didn't matter. What concerned her was getting to Mimi. The poodle was frantically paddling in a desperate effort to avoid getting swept under the falls. Kelly at last got on her feet, shivering wildly, and hurried to reach Mimi, now at the mouth of the cave.

The rocks beneath Kelly's feet were jagged and slippery, and she went down again. This time she'd managed to scoop Mimi up in her arms. Too little, too late, unfortunately.

Because here comes the water!

As if she weren't cold and shivering enough already.... Poor Mimi was also cold, the poor dog trembling against her. The cascade fell over her, and she should have been ready for it. Instead, she swallowed water and struggled to get to her feet. The cave seemed to be drawing her and Mimi deeper and deeper.

Get up, get up now! Panic quickly set in. To her horror, both she and Mimi were heading downward in the dark. She fought to catch her breath, something that was impossible to do while sputtering, and her heart slammed repeatedly against her chest. Kelly held onto Mimi for dear life as they both plunged downward.

How far down? Ten, twenty, fifty feet?

Oh, no, no, this is it! This is it!

If she didn't die on impact—strike her head against rocks at the bottom, for example—she could be down there for hours or days, and no one would ever hear her or come to her aid. Cold, terrified, and confused, she stared forward.

More lights. Dozens and dozens of lights. Blinking before her, dancing, disappearing, everywhere on the wet and cold descent in the cave's depths.

Finally, she landed. Mimi flew out of her arms and Kelly struggled to swim in the dark, until some light appeared at the surface of the water. Much deeper water, she realized, than what had surrounded the cascade.

Making it to the top, she went through a coughing spasm and saw Mimi. The dog was trying to swim, paddling her little paws for all she was worth. This water was warmer. That made no sense, but Kelly was grateful for the chilled water to have given way to this much warmer pond.

Pond... or creek? She and Mimi had emerged out of the cave. They were in what looked like a small creek, surrounded on each side by woods. Mimi had the right idea. She was swimming to dry ground. Kelly followed her.

Swimming with her backpack had been exhausting. As soon as she reached land, she shrugged out of the pack's straps and held Mimi in both her arms. She rested and caught her breath. Seated on the ground, she tossed her head back and gazed upwards.

The leaves were green. The trees were full, lush. Exactly the way the woods would have looked like in the summer.

Summer. It wasn't just warm now, it was *hot*. Summer-style hot.

It was summer. In that part of the woods, wherever she'd landed, it was summer.

"Come on, girl. Let's get back to the trail," Kelly urged, setting Mimi down on all fours and leaning against a tree to lift herself to her feet.

Was Mimi injured? Could she walk? The little dog was wobbly but evidently made of sturdy stuff. For a somewhat spoiled fur baby, that is. She walked as gingerly as Kelly did over rocks and a small incline, up to level ground again.

Where was the trail? *Any* trail? Kelly looked around, in front and behind herself.

No trail. No markings on the trees. None of those little signs with a figure of a man with a backpack and a walking stick in hand.

"Oh, shoot. Shoot, shoot, *shoot!*" she snapped under her breath. "Calm down. The trail has to be here somewhere."

Her phone. Maybe, by some stroke of luck, it hadn't been damaged. It had GPS. She could find her way back to the parking area and call it a day, the heck with burning calories for the rest of that day. In fact, she was stopping off at that Japanese/American fusion restaurant near her house and having some California rolls for all her troubles that day. Sushi wasn't fattening. That would leave enough calories for a slice of chocolate cake. Yes, that sounded about right. Sushi and chocolate cake to soothe her nerves. She didn't care how oddball the combination sounded, or the fact that she was defeating her own purpose by indulging in the chocolate cake.

First, however, she needed to get back to the trail. Kelly patted her side, where she'd last stored her cell in her waistband. No cell. She checked her backpack; no phone.

Lost in the water. Great.

"Go hiking, she said," she muttered to herself, referring to her friend and stepping hard along the unmarked ground. "It'll be fun, she said!"

This wasn't fun. She was lost. With a poodle, too. Not even a St. Bernard or a German Shepherd, or some other big breed that could defend her. Hopefully.

Should she cry out? Risk embarrassing herself? Drawing the attention of some bears or coyotes?

Kelly recalled hearing a story some months ago about a woman taking a hike with another small breed, like a Dachshund or something, and being followed by a pack of coyotes. That woman did have her cell on her and was able to call for help. All the same, it sounded like one terrifying experience.

But Kelly now had no phone. She didn't know where she was. It was just her, a poodle, and those woods.

From somewhere came the sound of voices. She took heart, though it sounded as if they were some distance away.

Voices! People! Civilization! She wasn't alone after all. She tugged on Mimi's leash.

"C'mon, baby, let's find them," she coaxed her pet.

All right, so it would be a teensy bit embarrassing to admit she'd gotten lost. She'd get over it. Lesson learned, and she would never venture off the marked trail again.

Where were those people? She felt like she was getting deeper into the woods. The sight of a cabin several yards away made her smile with relief. Boy, it was hot. She peeled off the backpack and the hoodie, tying the jacket's sleeves around her waist. Now she could make out the voices. A man and a woman, and it sounded like they were arguing.

Could this day get any worse? Wasn't it her luck that the only two people in those woods were bickering amongst themselves? Cautiously, trying to avoid being seen, she approached the cabin, keeping her wits about her.

Well, hopefully, they'll get me back on the trail and I'll leave them to their fight, Kelly promised herself.

"Sarah, you hold still right now! You fall off and make me chase you, and your bottom will pray the price for it!"

Kelly came to a halt. At her feet, Mimi growled until her master reached down and picked her up. The dog's heart was pounding, though not quite as hard as Kelly's.

Hold still? Hold still for what?

An odd sound pierced the air. Then a woman cried out indignantly. "Ow! Charles, stop! Stop! I'll behave!"

Kelly gasped. Was the brute beating her? Out there, in the open? She peeked out from the side of the cabin and instantly her lower jaw dropped open.

In stunned disbelief, she watched the scene. A stocky, bearded man sat on a wooden chair. Draped across his lap was a woman. She was putting up a major fuss—not that Kelly could blame her. That thin, long stick he was brandishing whipped through the air again, landing on her bare bottom. She was wearing a long dress, which seemed odd. In that weather, why wasn't she wearing shorts? The full skirt and even petticoats of the dress were pulled up and gathered around her waist. He had yanked down her rather unusual undergarments and was vigorously striking her bright pink orbs with the thin twig.

He's spanking her! Oh, he's—he's spanking that woman!

Kelly straightened up, afraid to be spotted. Then she couldn't help it. She peeked out again.

"Third time this week, Sarah," the man was saying. "Third time I've had to spank this naughty backside of yours. Let's see if we have better luck with the switch than we did with the paddle..."

Kelly winced as the stick came down at the same time the woman yelped. She could swear she felt it, too, as insane as that thought was. The switch left a red welt that had to have felt like her bottom was aflame.

What was going on there? She studied the man's manner of dress as well as the woman's. Had she stumbled into some 1800s reenactment or something? Were these just mountain people who hadn't yet chosen to join the Twenty-First Century?

"Oh, I said I'd be good!" The woman sounded like she was hiccoughing in between bawling.

The man abruptly stopped smacking her backside with the switch. He set it down beside his chair and rested one hand flat on her blazing and swollen behind, his other arm wrapped firmly around her waist. He was talking to her, but his voice was low. Kelly strained to hear, able solely to catch snippets of what she guessed was a lecture.

"Now, Sarah, I expected better of you... woman, if it takes me spanking you for you to learn... we're not done here yet..."

What? Not done yet? Kelly swallowed hard. She'd barely caught her breath when the man proceeded with the spanking, this time peppering each of her bottom cheeks with smacks from

his hand. The woman was a sobbing and bucking mess, trying in vain to get her already scorched rear out of the line of fire.

Kelly tried to look away but couldn't. It was as if her feet were bolted in place and she couldn't budge. She stared on, the tip of her tongue darting out and moistening her lips.

No. No, no, no, she told herself. *You are not getting turned on by that. No way!*

What was this place? What was going on? Why were they dressed that way?

Another question came at her from behind—and spoken in a deep, masculine voice.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Kelly cried out and turned on her heel, clutching Mimi tighter to her chest. She could actually hear her heartbeat in her ears as she stared up into the face of a tall, imposing man glaring back down at her. Clear blue eyes, like turquoise ice, commanded her gaze from under the brim of a black hat. He wore black pants and a brown, button-down vest over a shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing muscular forearms.

"Nothing! I'm—*I'm lost!*" she choked out the words. She was on the verge of tears.

"Lost? What's a woman like you doing out here by yourself in the first place?" He sneered. "Besides trespassing. And not minding your own business."

Though afraid, she took offense. "I'm not trespassing. I told you, I'm lost! But fine. I don't need your help!"

She pushed past him. His look of surprise gave her a pitiful sliver of satisfaction.

"Come on back here, woman!" the stranger bellowed after her.

"Not on your life, cowboy!" She mumbled those words under her breath as she ran, still holding onto Mimi tightly. That was what he looked like, too. Come to think of it, so did the man turning that poor woman's bottom twenty shades of red.

Cowboys. Those men were cowboys.

Where am I, Kelly wondered.

Seconds later, running wildly through the woods, she collided with a limb that she'd failed to see after glancing back at the man in black, who was pursuing her. She saw stars—or maybe it was those deceptive lights once again—before she fell to the ground in one unceremonious, and certainly unconscious, heap.