

# Poacher's Prey

By

Lorna Locke

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## Chapter One

The bull elk stood calm and still on the hillock in the middle of the clearing. He was magnificent, otherworldly, an enchanted stag from a fairytale. Millicent guessed the bull must be at least five feet at the shoulder—almost as tall as Millicent herself—and his antlers looked to span a good four feet, with more points than she could count at a distance.

Nearby, the bull's harem of twenty cows grazed lazily in the clearing. Millicent smiled to see the female elk, safe and unworried under the watchful gaze of their protector. They all wore their dark, reddish summer coats.

Millicent sighed and set down her basket. She stretched, relishing the warmth of the sun on her bare limbs. Out in the forest, Millicent was free to push up her sleeves and knot her skirt for the sake of soft August breezes and sunshine. In that moment, just at the edge of a clearing, she imagined herself to be as safe and contented as those elk.

It would be easy, too easy, to get lost in daydreams and let the whole afternoon slip away. With the kind of extravagant sigh she would never indulge within earshot of her mother and stepfather, Millicent tore her gaze from the elk herd and turned toward home. She still had a quarter hour's walk through the woods to look forward to, and vowed to enjoy it as much as possible without dawdling.

The day was lovely, warm without being too hot, and the golden afternoon sunlight lent a soft glow to the riot of greenery that surrounded Millicent as she picked her path through the duff and brush of the temperate rainforest that surrounded her home. On days like this, Millicent could easily daydream her way into believing she was living in a fairytale—especially with that magnificent stag as guardian of this enchanted wood.

Arriving home, Millicent was reminded that every fairytale needs its ogre. “Oh, good afternoon, D-dad,” she said, stuttering as she always did when she called Spaulding Enos “Dad,” as he insisted.

Spaulding was sprawled messily at the table that took up most of the space in the kitchen half of the Enos family shack. Slowly, he lifted his big, square head and squinted at his stepdaughter. Spaulding grunted and let his head drop back onto his chest.

Millicent babbled, “I-I didn't expect you home so soon—”

“Hm! And what do you care what hours I keep?” her stepfather snarled. He was in one of his bad moods.

Millicent swallowed. It was difficult to keep from babbling when she was startled and dismayed, and she was certainly both of those things upon stepping into the kitchen and finding Spaulding there in the middle of the day. Something bad must have happened to bring him home so early, and in so foul a mood. Maybe a hunt went poorly and his client had refused to pay. That didn't happen often, but when it did Spaulding sulked dramatically. Millicent pressed her lips together to keep meaningless words, words that would only aggravate and provoke her mother's husband, from tumbling helplessly out of her mouth.

She turned to put away the wild mushrooms and berries she'd foraged during her walk, hoping Spaulding would fall asleep so she could tiptoe out of the kitchen and get started on her evening chores without hassle. The scrape of his chair legs across the rough wood floor set the hairs on the back of Millicent's neck on end. Millicent did not turn around to see, but instead sensed her stepfather's bulk looming over her. His breath rasped uncomfortably close to her ears. She never knew the smartest way to respond, or not respond, when Spaulding got like this, so Millicent defaulted to freezing up.

“I asked you a question,” he said.

Millicent's mind went blank. He'd asked her a question? Panic set in; what was it? “Uh...”

“You my boss-man now, Milly?” He prodded her in the ribs with one of his long, broad fingers. “What were you planning, child, that coming home and finding your ol' dad in the house gives you such a scare?”

He was standing too close. Millicent barely managed to keep from wincing away from his damp breath on the back of her neck. “Nothing, D-dad. I was just lost in thought, I guess, and it startled me to see anybody home.”

Spaulding grunted and retreated to the table. Millicent busied herself putting up mushrooms to dry while her breathing returned to normal and she regained control of her wobbly limbs. When she was finished, Millicent had to squeeze past her stepfather to get to the other room of the cabin, but he held up a hand to stop her.

“Yes, sir?”

Spaulding just looked her up and down for a moment, establishing that she had to wait on him to speak. Millicent stood obediently, hands clasped, eyes cast down to the rough-hewn wood of the kitchen floor. He said, “You ought to be careful when you head out into the woods, Milly.”

“Yes, sir.”

He snorted. “I mean it. With these national park men prancing around acting like they own the game, and the timber, and the ground itself?” He clasped his hand on her shoulder possessively. “They’d probably love to catch Spaulding Enos’s daughter poaching mushrooms and berries. So just watch yourself, girl, and keep to yourself.”

“Of course, Dad. Of course. Thank you for the warning, Dad.” She didn’t think it would be prudent to point out that her berries and mushrooms had been harvested outside the park and were perfectly legal.

He removed his hand from Millicent’s shoulder with a grunt and lumbered from the kitchen to the living quarters. Spaulding threw himself across his bed and soon enough was snoring.

Millicent had to get out of the house. Spaulding Enos simply sucked up all the air and took all the space in the tiny cabin. If only Mama was home, she thought, and immediately felt like a traitorous little wretch. The reason she wanted her mother home, Millicent realized miserably, was that when Mama was in the cabin, Spaulding’s rage was likelier to fall on her than on Millicent. At least the two women together could share the burden of managing Spaulding’s moods. With Mama gone to nurse Aunt Sissy through her latest miscarriage, Millicent was Spaulding’s handiest target.

Outside, light drained from the sky. Evening was approaching. It would be hours yet until true darkness descended, for August evenings in Constance were long, but the sun and its warmth seemed to have withdrawn to secret places for the night. Millicent shivered.