

DEPUTY'S DILEMMA

BIG ROCK ROMANCE BOOK THREE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



Evie was tired, wretchedly so. She'd been walking for days, managing to stay away from any signs of people. Her pack was heavy on her back even though she traveled as lightly as she dared. She needed some supplies for survival. Her heaviest items were a Colt Navy pistol and Winchester rifle and bullets for each, but she had to have those. Her water canteen was heavy, but it was vital, even though she tried not to get too far from water. Rivers and streams seemed plentiful here. The trouble was that she didn't know exactly where *here* was. She knew she was keeping an easterly course, but she had no idea how far she'd come or how close to a settlement or town she might be. She wasn't even sure how many days she'd walked. She thought it was between two to three weeks, and she wished she had kept better track of time. She hoped to get far enough away, to a place where nobody had ever heard of the Goodacre family. Until she was that far away, she didn't want to see another soul.

She decided to sit and rest for a few minutes on the trunk of a fallen tree. She considered setting a snare trap nearby to catch some small game then decided to move on, since there was plenty of daylight left. If she didn't catch anything soon, it would just be

wasted time. When she felt rested enough, she stood up from the tree trunk, took a deep breath and heaved the pack over her shoulder. She picked up the rifle and headed east again.

The weather was mostly clear with a cool wind blowing from the north. Evie wondered if that meant a cold snap might be coming soon. She hoped not. It was late summer, but even so, the weather in the foothills was unpredictable. She had a light coat and a couple of blankets for her bedroll, but that was about it. She wore long johns and britches and a flannel shirt, hand-me-downs from her older brothers. Her prized possessions, she wore on her feet: nearly new boots that one of her brothers had given to her. They were men's boots, but they fit her perfectly and were nice and warm with knit socks. He had probably stolen them, but she didn't care. She had another set of long johns, another flannel shirt and another pair of britches in her pack. If it got cold enough, she could always wear both sets of long underwear and both shirts at one time. She could handle the weather as long as it didn't get below freezing. The worst times in the cold were at night, when sleeping outside. She had to find a protected area out of the wind. Unfortunately, that wasn't always very easy to do in the woods. A downed tree like the one she'd sat on earlier would be good to snuggle against. There wasn't always a downed tree when she needed one, though.

Evie kept walking, ignoring the hunger in her belly. When it got a little later in the afternoon, she'd find a place and set a snare, and if she was near water, she'd set one for fish, too. She'd start a fire to cook it if she could find some easily ignitable char to use with the flint and steel. If not, she'd use one of her matches. She hated to waste the matches, though, if she didn't need to.

Up ahead loomed a big hill, but she was too weary to climb up and over it. Her only alternative was to go around, so she sighed heavily and determined she'd get around it before she stopped for the night. Maybe there was a protected area on the other side, and if so, she'd stop there. The closest way appeared to be to her right.

She couldn't tell from there exactly what was to the left. It was just more foothill as far the trees allowed her to see. There were fewer trees to the right, so the path looked easier to walk. Once she got on her way, her spirits lifted when she thought she heard running water in the distance. *Oh, Lordy, please let that be a river or a good-sized stream where I can catch some fish! And wash, too. It's been days since I could scrub myself and wash my clothes.*

Her path meandered over some rises and around but was more or less easterly. The water sounded closer. She decided to climb up one of the less steep rises at the foot of the big hill to see if she could see how close the water was. She was halfway up the steep hillside when she saw something that made her stop in her tracks. It was a cabin, and it looked like a bend in the big stream was about sixty or seventy yards away from the cabin. Her mouth went dry and her heart jumped into her throat. *Oh please, oh please, let it be abandoned. I can't let any people see me. This looks like a perfect place to hole up.*

She sat there for nearly half an hour, waiting for any signs of movement, but didn't see any. She got up, grabbed her bag and took off. The excitement of seeing the cabin gave her a whole new level of energy. It took another twenty or twenty-five minutes to get to it. She decided not to call out to see if anyone was there. In case there were people there, she wanted to be able to leave, sight unseen.

When she neared the cabin, she left her pack behind a big tree and made her way to a window on the east side, facing the water. The only other window was near the front door, on the south side where there was a big, wide, covered porch and a big stack of firewood. She was just able to see inside the side window and was happy to note there were cobwebs in places that would surely be wiped clean if anyone were using the cabin.

She grabbed her pack and moved to the front door. It opened. The cabin wasn't much, but it was downright luxurious to someone who had slept in the elements on the ground for as long as Evie

had. She thought perhaps it had been someone's home once, long ago, but was now a hunting cabin or had been left for weary travelers such as herself. It had a cot. It was a naked cot with a rolled up old quilt at the foot of it. *Thank you, sweet Jesus; I don't have to sleep on the ground tonight.*

There were both a fireplace and a small wood stove with a flat top that had a couple of pots, a covered iron skillet, and an old coffee percolator sitting on top. The fireplace was a big one for the small cabin, with a long arm to hold a big cooking pot. The pot itself was on the hearth just in front of the fireplace, a big ladle sticking up out of it. There were a couple of buckets sitting on the floor. A long rustic table was along one wall and two large sections of a tree trunk on the floor appeared to be used as chairs. A shelf above the table held mismatched tin plates, bowls, cups, saucers, and some forks and spoons. There were some cans of food and some canisters that she'd check out later. There was a small washtub at one end of the table, about the size to wash dishes or bathe a baby. At the other end was a lantern, a bottle of coal oil, and some candles. The wall had several hooks on it. Only the big ones by the door were actual metal hooks, sturdy enough to hold heavy dampened winter coats. The rest of them were small tree branches and sturdy twigs that had been nailed into the wall. There were some rags and towels hanging on some. In the corner were an axe, a small shovel and a broom.

Evie grinned and even hummed as she put down her pack on the table and dug out her matches. She opened the stove to find dry wood and kindling. *Whoever was here last, thank you!* She ran out to gather more dry leaves to get the fire started faster, making a mental note to gather more wood and kindling when she left so the next person would find the same welcoming sight. In no time, she had the fire going to her satisfaction.

She grabbed the buckets and headed outside to the river. Her plan was to clean the cabin, wash her clothes and bathe. On her way out, she noticed a fire pit in the ground, a perfect place to roast

small game. *I should probably set some snares before I bathe. If I stay long enough, I can put together a smoker over that and make some jerky.* As she neared the water, she eyed her surroundings carefully. The ground was flat except for the last few yards near the water. She could see that this stream was a wide one, and she was gratified to see a fish jump out of the water. *Don't go far, little brown trout; I may have you for supper.* Not far from the water, was a huge, nearly flat rock. It would be perfect for laying out clothes to dry or even lying on to dry herself after a cleansing dunk in the water. It would also be nice to just sit on and watch the sunrise over the water.

Back at the cabin, she took all the pots and pans outside to rinse out the dust before using them. Once back inside, she filled the pots and set them on the stovetop to begin heating.

Evie opened up her pack and took out what she needed to make some snares. She found some cording and grabbed her knife and went outside. Then she looked around to find pieces of wood suitable for the base and hook pieces. There was a nice, long, sturdy one she liked for the base and she set about sharpening one end of it to a point to go into the ground. On the other end, she notched out a place on the side about an inch from the top that was just deep enough to catch a similarly carved hook piece. Next, she took the smaller piece of wood to make the hook part and cut in the notch that would interlock with the base piece. She wanted to make sure the thin cording didn't come off the wood, so she added little indentations at both the top and bottom where the cord would tie onto the hook.

She looked around to find a rock that was hefty enough and flat enough on one side to use as a hammer. Next, she looked for a grove of bushes and brush that also had a sapling nearby. When she found one she liked, she hammered the base of the snare into the ground with the notch facing away from the sapling. After that, she tied her cord to the top of the sapling, about six or seven inches down. She pulled the cord, bringing the sapling with it to see how long she needed to make the leader cord. She allowed enough line

to tie a knot and cut the cording, then tied the leader cord to the top of the hook piece. She took another length of cord and tied a slip noose on one end, and tied the other end to the bottom part of the hook. She carefully placed the two oppositely notched pieces of wood together and held them to keep it from springing as she put the final touches on the noose, elevating parts of it on rocks and sticks. That would have to do for now. Later, she might bring out some jerky from her pack to bait it with. She'd caught many animals without bait before; they usually got caught by a leg by just stepping in as they walked.

She went back in the cabin to find the water heating up nicely and emptied one of the pots into the washtub. She sliced off a sliver of soap from her pack and put it in the tub to dissolve. Meanwhile, she took the broom and swept away all the cobwebs from the ceiling, walls and furniture before sweeping everything out the front door, then she swept down the front porch. She noticed the sky darkening and thought she'd better hurry so she could finish her work and bathe in the stream before it rained.

Evie took off every stitch of her clothes and grabbed her other dirty ones out of her pack. She was practically giddy over the thought that tomorrow, she'd have two sets of clean, dry clothes. She poured some more of the hot water into the tub and started in on her shirts and socks first. She got a little more soap out and used it to rub on some spots to scrub. Next came her long johns, then her britches, as they were the most soiled. She got them all washed and wrung out enough so that she could carry them. She threw the wash water out on the ground on the other side of the cabin and rinsed out the tub, took another sliver of soap to use on herself, grabbed a towel and the pile of clothes, and headed for the water, humming as she hadn't in a long time.

She got down to the water and piled the clothes on the rock, taking one at a time into the stream to rinse out the last vestiges of soap. Evie spread her clothes out on the rock and a nearby bush, hoping the wind would speed their drying since the sun was hiding

behind the gathering dark clouds. She surveyed the clothes with satisfaction when she heard a noise over near where she'd set her snare. She couldn't believe her luck when she found a rabbit there.

As much as she hated killing any animals, she knew she had to eat. She did what she had to do. As she thought she'd like to dry some more for jerky, she reset the snare before she went to skin the rabbit and put it in a pot of boiling water with some salt on top of the stove.

As she headed back to the water, she was extra glad for the opportunity to bathe after skinning that rabbit. She took the piece of soap and stepped into the cool water. It was a little too cool to be comfortable, but she'd just ignore that and stay in the water as long as she could stand it. She took the soap and lathered up her short hair. It washed and dried so much more quickly now since she'd taken the shears to it before she took off from home. She hoped that in a man's clothes and with short hair that barely came to her chin, she'd be taken for a man. A couple of her brothers had hair even longer than that, so it was reasonable to assume she could pass for a small man.



DEPUTY AARON GLOVER was on his way to his family's old cabin where he met up with his brother, Matthew, the same time every year. Only, this year, he'd received a wire from Matt saying that his wife had fallen and broken an arm and he wouldn't be able to leave her. Aaron had been sorely disappointed, since he and his brother were as close as brothers could be and had been all their lives. They only got to see each other once a year, and this was it.

Aaron had debated about whether or not he should go on by himself. He wasn't particularly needed at the jailhouse since it had been quiet lately and Sheriff Larkin had it under control. He'd been looking forward to getting away for a leisurely time of enjoying his brother and hunting and fishing. Now that his brother wasn't going

to be there, it might not be as much fun. In the end, though, he realized he was geared up for going to the cabin anyway, and he looked forward to getting away, even if it was by himself.

He packed up just enough supplies for two weeks. He planned to hunt and fish for his meat, but he packed some potatoes, carrots, onions and several other things, too. He had dried beef and dried chicken, and Mary Smith, at the restaurant, packed him a big bag of some bacon and biscuits to take.

His horse, Big Boy, was loaded down so much that Aaron considered taking another one as a pack animal. In the end, he didn't, realizing his supplies would be greatly reduced on the way home anyway. He'd spent last night camped on the trail and had ridden a long way today in order to get there as early as he could. When the skies began darkening and the air began to chill, he had pushed Big Boy as much as he felt he could. He wanted to get to the cabin before the bottom fell out.

The thunder began in the distance long before the light rain began falling. The lightning was still so far away he couldn't see it. He traveled through intermittent light rains and knew he would be coming up on the cabin in another mile or so. It wasn't quite dark yet, so he felt good and was fairly optimistic that the heavy rains might hold off at least until he made it there.



WHEN THE THUNDER BEGAN, Evie kept a close watch out on the skies. She didn't mind being in the water with thunder, but she wanted to be out of it if lightning was close. When it started sprinkling, she decided to get her clothes inside. She stepped up out of the stream, wringing out her hair as much as she could, before taking the towel and giving herself a quick wipe down. She finished by wrapping her hair up in the towel, grabbing her clothes, and making a dash for the cabin as the sprinkles turned into a light rain.



THE WIND PICKED up and the thunder cracked, getting closer both in frequency and distance. Aaron rushed to make it to the cabin, only to be taken aback when he saw smoke coming from the wood stove chimney pipe. *Damn. Who the hell's in my cabin?* He didn't mind a stranded traveler taking refuge there, but did it have to be when he was there, too, planning to be alone?

It's hard to take the deputy out of the man, though, and he realized it was possible that the trespasser wasn't just a traveler needing shelter for the night. He knew he could run into thieves or rustlers or worse out here. These hills were a great place to hide out if a person knew his way around. Aaron left his badge in his saddlebag but pulled out his pistol as he neared the front of the cabin. Something odd caught his eye, and he looked off to the brushy area on his left and saw a tree bending in a different direction from the wind. Someone had set a snare to trap some food.

The rain had let up into a slow drizzle at the moment, but the wind whistled fiercely and the nearing thunder echoed. He didn't see a horse and wondered if maybe the trespasser had gone off to hunt. Or maybe there was one inside who didn't have a horse, and possibly another with a horse was away for a bit. There were any number of possibilities. He dismounted, and with his left hand, he unlaced the string that held his hunting knife in its sheath strapped to his leg. He led the horse up to the house, up under the porch roof, knowing that the wind and thunder were too loud for anyone inside to hear them walking up on wet grass and dirt.

He stood poised at the front door, preparing himself to find either a stranded traveler or a criminal. He took a deep breath, threw the door open, and pointed the gun inside.

The one thing he never expected to see was a naked woman.