

Chapter One

Crouched in the Tennessee mountain brush, Delaney Wilkins pushed up from her knees and moved farther into the thicket for a better view. Beneath the canopy of laurel and oaks, the scent of wet earth and decomposing leaves rose thick in the air around her. She craned her head to look between the trees. Some blackened, others gray, trunks stood in varying stages of decay, victims to the slew of storms that ripped through the area several years back. And among them, two strangers. By the outline of their build, the rough jerk to their movements, they appeared to be men. But gender didn't matter. Trespassers were trespassers and they were on *her* land.

Delaney held her breath, suppressing all thought but one. No one was supposed to be in *her* part of the woods. Did they venture too far off the USFS trail and get lost?

Her instincts hummed. The USFS was public land. It was possible. But these two seemed too intent on whatever it was they were doing to be lost hikers. She could hear their voices but was unable to make out the details of their conversation, or what—exactly—they were doing. *Damn it*, she had to get closer.

A quick survey of her surroundings told her the answer wasn't here. Not unless she wanted to take up cliff diving down the slope before her, causing a ruckus that would obviously reveal her presence. Delaney scanned the upper ridge beyond the men. The trail behind her would take her to the top, but it was a twenty minute hike at a good clip. But they could be gone by then. She dropped her focus back to the strangers. There *was* one other way. She spied the narrow trail leading off to her left. It was a footpath she had forged years ago, one created as her secret weapon in games of "hide and seek" played with her cousin, Jeremiah Ladd. At one time, she had used the trail to kick his butt. At the moment, it would serve to get her thirty feet closer. Unfortunately, the pace she'd have to travel to remain undetected would have to be excruciatingly slow.

Delaney considered her options. Her Palomino, Sadie, was tied to a post at the base, the landmark her family had built to mark the opening for this trail. If she had to get anywhere fast, she knew Sadie would take her. Physical confrontation didn't concern her—not with a pistol holstered snug in her boot.

Gravel and sticks crunched behind her. A thunderbolt of fear slammed into her. Shooting hand to boot, she whirled, ready to pounce.

"Hi," came the hushed greeting.

With a sharp intake of breath, Delaney recovered from the initial shock and took in the unexpected sight of Nick Harris, the real estate developer determined to buy her family's property—*but what the hell was he doing here?*

There, in the middle of the path, the six-foot-four man stood like a fool.

"Get down," she hissed, her pulse continuing to hammer as she waved him toward the ground. Surprise swirled around a sudden suspicion teeming in his swarthy black eyes as he spied the hand sliding free from her boot. With a quick check on her quarry, she growled under her breath, "And be quiet!"

Squatting, he glanced in the direction she'd been looking and asked, "What's going on?"

“Nothing,” she said, her focus darting between him and the men. “Why are you following me?”

“I saw your horse tied to the post and became concerned.”

“Don’t be.”

Across the woods, the men rose to their full height and it was then Delaney got her first decent look at them. One was tall and bulky, the other was short and wiry. Wearing tattered cowboy hats and dirty T-shirts, they weren’t tourists. Were they squatters?

Laughter punctuated the quiet, drawing Nick’s quick attention. “Who are they?” he demanded.

“Don’t know,” she replied, wondering what the men would do next.

“Let’s get out of here.” He pulled at her arm. “Those men could be trouble.”

Delaney shot him a hard glance and jerked away from his grasp. “Those men are trespassing on my land. If anyone needs to get out of here, it’s them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “If they’re trespassers, you need to call the police.”

She scoffed at the notion. Calling the police would not help her discover why they were here. It would only alert the men to the fact that she was onto them. The larger man suddenly slapped the shorter on the back and said something, but not loud enough for her to discern even a word. Within minutes, the strangers collected their belongings and took off in the opposite direction.

Delaney shot to her feet. Where were they going? That trail didn’t lead back to the government forest land. *It led straight back to her cabin.*

“I’m getting you out of here,” Nick said, his voice closing in on her back.

Delaney wasn’t going anywhere, especially with Nick Harris. “I’m going after them,” she said. Right after she searched the area below where she’d first seen the men.

“Oh, no you’re not.” Nick encircled a large, firm palm around her bare bicep.

Hot and unwelcome against her skin, his hand tightened. The hair on the nape of her neck prickled in rebellion. She looked up into his face, noting his thick brow gathered in a storm of its own. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not about to let you run off and chase after strangers. Those men could be up to no good.”

“You’re damn right they are—and on my property!” Delaney yanked her arm, only to find it immovable. “Let me go,” she spat.

“No.”

At the force of his objection, she stopped. Glaring at him, Delaney performed a rapid assessment of the situation. While trained in physical defense, taking on the over two-hundred-some pound muscular Mr. Harris was not what she wanted to be doing at the moment. She wanted to get over there and find out what those two men had been doing. She wanted to follow them to see where they were going. She stared up at Nick, her displeasure intensifying as she noted the hint of amusement in his eyes. “Why are you here again?”

“I told you. I saw your horse back there without you on it.” He relaxed into a smile. “I became concerned.”

Dimples carved into his cheeks on either side of his mouth, compliments to the slight cleft in his chin centered within his angular jaw. Black-brown eyes appeared seamless beneath his heavy brow and deeply tanned skin. With his short, dark hair rich and full, combed away from his face, his appearance was one of rugged masculinity that seemed right at home in these woods. But this was Ladd land. Her land. He had no business interfering.

“My whereabouts and well-being are none of your concern,” she said, making no effort to conceal her annoyance at his gallant show of male dominance, “and I hereby officially relieve you of duty. I can take care of myself, thank you.”

“I’m not leaving without you.”

She grumbled under her breath. She could stay and protest, wasting precious time, or she could feign conciliation and take Sadie after the men. No doubt they were taking the back way out. Nick didn’t mention anything about a horse of his own. Delaney savored a private smile, a plan forming in her mind. There was no way he could stop her once on horseback. “Fine,” she retorted and headed back toward the trail, taking the incline in three long strides.

Once on the path, she walked as fast as she could, eager to lose him.

Nick caught up with her easily, matching her stride. “Do you have much trouble around here with trespassing?”

“Some.” Boots jarred her legs as she navigated the hard-packed, uneven clay, littered with rocks and roots. As they walked side-by-side, Delaney couldn’t help but notice her five-foot-five inches and a buck twenty in weight were dwarfed by comparison to Nick.

“How do you handle it?”

Anger rose hot and fast in her breast and she turned on him. “Why? So you can map out a response to silence the trouble, once you swindle the property from my uncle?”

“I’m not trying to swindle the property,” he said, his tone measured and even, as though it required effort for him to remain calm.

“Aren’t you? Ernie already said *no*. Why are you still here?” she asked, taking him in from the side as she marched down the trail, passing an opening that revealed a cascade of water. It crashed over rocks and gullies and fallen logs, making its way downstream. Flooded with sunshine and white caps, Zack’s Falls was one of Ladd Springs’ many assets.

Nick raised his voice over the roar of waterfall. “I’m a patient man, Ms. Wilkins. I understand he needs time to think it over. I’m willing to give it to him.”

“You don’t know my uncle.”

“Why don’t you tell me about him?” he asked, his voice drenched in friendship and camaraderie. “I’m not a bad guy. I’ll make it a win-win proposition for everyone.”

Delaney didn’t like the abrupt switch from rawhide to velvet. Nick was trying to con her and she was not a woman easily conned. Well, not anymore anyway. “No sale,” she told him.

Nick raised a brow. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” She flipped her face up to meet him directly. “No sale—in every sense of the words.”

Delaney didn’t speak for the remaining ten-minute trek to her horse. She had nothing more to say to the man. He was here to get her uncle to sell his property, land that bordered the Tennessee/Carolina state line on one side, the public forest managed by the United States Forest Service on the other, and was chockfull of rivers and creeks, waterfalls and springs. She’d grown up on this land, buried her mother on this land. In her family for over six generations, this property was not only priceless but of sentimental value. None of which Mr. Harris cared about. He wanted to develop it, build some fancy hotel and spa and exploit the natural resources of the property. He didn’t care what it meant to her family. But that was neither here nor there. Uncle Ernie would not sell to an outsider. At least they had that much in common, Delaney mused sourly, as she pushed a branch out of her way.

The trail opened to a small patch of grassy field, tall strands of willowy green littered with tiny purple and yellow blossoms, butterflies hanging low and plentiful. Between here and the property, a river flowed, the same one that wound down along the trails from Zack's Falls. Sadie neighed at the sight of her owner and shook her blonde mane in excitement. Heartened by the sight of her mare, Delaney begged off. "Thanks again for your concern, but I'll be okay from here on out."

He eyed her warily. "Where you headed?"

"Back to the cabin." As if it was any of his business. She grabbed the worn leather bridle and unwrapped it from the post. Holding it in her left hand, she seized Sadie's mane and hoisted herself up and on, sliding into a seated position behind the horse's neck. Delaney gently pulled the reins secure and looked down at Nick. It occurred to her that this was a much better view of the man. A handsome man, but a meddling one nonetheless. "See you around."

"Doesn't it hurt to ride without a saddle?"

"Not a bit," she replied. In her book, there was no other way to ride a horse. After a quick rap to her rump, Sadie took off at a gallop, tail waving high and proud.

Nick crossed arms over chest and watched her go. Delaney Wilkins was like poetry in motion. A natural on bareback, she rode with the fluidity gained by a lifetime of experience. Not only did she move as one with her horse, but her skin glowed with the same silky suede coloring of her Palomino, her white blonde hair—a similar glossy mane in both length and style—crashing in waves down her back as she rode. Her light brown tank revealed fit upper arms, small round breasts and a narrow waist. Then there were her jeans. Nick felt a surge in his loins. He'd never met a woman who wore a pair of Levi's like Delaney did—rough, ragged, the ripped edges of white thread shredding around her heavy brown boots—boots that looked to be the one and only pair she owned. Yet somehow he found the shabby attire sexy as hell.

She was sexy as hell. Which would be a bonus if he could convince her to stay on and manage the stables of the hotel he planned to build. *And he would build it.* Ernie Ladd was a tough old goat, he'd give him that. But when it came to negotiating land deals there was no one better to get the job done than he. Patience was a virtue. Setting fire to greed was part of the process. Nick understood that once the kin-folk got wind of the money he was offering, they'd press the old man to sell. Legacy was a powerful driver. But dollars were more powerful.

Nick began the haul back to the main house for another go-round with the old man. He hadn't added a single new property in almost five years, but after the gem he'd opened in the rain forests of Brazil, it was understandable. Visions of a particular brunette slipped into the forefront of his mind, stirring the pot of need. Feisty and fantastic, she had been a great distraction, but so had his attorney. Nick beat the big guys to the punch in securing a property in South America's largest growth market. Fueled by the rising domestic traveler in search of eco-luxury, property values had exploded, but so had his headaches as he fought lawsuit after lawsuit. Most were bogus claims stating he didn't receive proper authorization from the Brazilian government, while others were straight-up accusations of corruption. None of which were true. Nick played by the rules, even agreeing to the extortion tactics for financial contributions to the Amazon rain forest preservation fund. As the leader in boutique eco-hotels, he was more than happy to make these financial contributions. It was his business to conserve resources, work his hotels into the environment with minimal impact. He simply didn't like to be forced to contribute or be accused of skirting the law. Mandatory anything rubbed him the wrong way. But then again, he had learned a long time ago, greed usurps all. A concept to which his investors were not immune.

The pressure to produce was on. Between expensive litigation and a weak economy, Nick needed to inject new excitement into his hotel chain, and Ladd Springs would do the trick.

Chapter Two

Nick returned to the farmhouse, the main estate on the property—if one could call it that—and found the man in question sitting in one of two threadbare rockers. The woven backs were torn from years of use and neglect, much like the wood-framed home where eaves hung precariously from rusty nails and posts were scarred by chips and nicks. The floor itself was warped and split, as though someone built the house a hundred years ago and hadn't touched it since. It was lived in, but not cared for, much like the owner himself. Nick considered the old man, rocking back and forth in his chair, pipe dangling from the corner of his clenched mouth, and could only imagine what the house looked like on the inside, but he didn't expect an invitation to be forthcoming.

Nick strolled up to the porch. He cleared his throat and donned a friendly tone. "Hello, Mr. Ladd."

Ernie Ladd regarded him with a guarded stare. "What do you want now?" he spat between the hard line of his lips.

The Ladd clan weren't an affable bunch, that was for sure. Even the good-looking ones. "I've come to talk."

"We ain't got nothin' to talk about, I already told you."

Nick pasted a smile on his face, a move handy when met with hostility. "I understand. It's a lot to think about. Have you discussed it with your family?"

"No and I ain't going to. There's nothin' to discuss."

"Who you talkin' to, Ernie?" A younger man walked out of the house, allowing the screen door to slam closed behind him with a loud whack. He was slim, early-thirties, with a scruffy jaw that matched the old man's. The lines in his face were softer, but just as uninviting. Was this Ladd's son?

"This here land-poacher," Ernie griped back.

"Huh?" The younger man's expression zipped closed. "What are you talking about?"

Ernie pulled out his pipe and pointed it at Nick. "This here fella is trying to rob me of my land, that's what I'm talkin' about."

"Whoa..." Nick held up his hands. "I'm not trying to rob anyone of anything. I'm offering to buy the land, for a pretty penny I might add." The last part he directed toward the stranger.

"You call that pretty?" Ernie leaped to his feet with more agility than Nick would have believed him capable. Standing on two legs that looked like sticks with knots for knees stuck into work boots that looked three sizes too big, and with his black belt sash pulled high and tight over a bump of a belly, he glared. Beneath his ball cap, Ernie Ladd's ears poked out and his eyes popped with fury behind large horn-rimmed glasses sitting on the edge of his nose. The man was so bony, so pale, Nick swore his cheeks were about to push clear through his skin. "It's called stealin', is what it is!"

"Calm down, Mr. Ladd, calm down." Last thing Nick needed was for the old man to die of a heart attack. "We can talk price if you want. I'm willing to discuss what you need."

"He don't need nothin' from you," the younger man piped in.

"And you are?"

“The name is Clem. Clem Sweeney and I’m here caretaker of this property and close personal friend of the family.”

Caretaker? But he thought Delaney took care of the grounds. The horses, for certain, though he recalled mention of another female tied to the property, a friend or neighbor. Was this Clem related somehow?

“It don’t matter,” Ernie grumbled. “I’m not sellin’ to the likes of him.”

“It’s not yours to sell.” Delaney strolled around the edge of the house and trucked up the side steps. All the men turned to her. In no hurry, she appeared more tired than agitated, her long hair pulled back into a ponytail, accentuating the round of her cheeks, her button of a nose. Other than mascara, she wore no makeup, made no fuss with her appearance. But then again, a woman as beautiful as Delaney Wilkins didn’t need the help.

Ernie scowled at her. “Hell it isn’t.”

“It belongs to Felicity,” she said, fatigue escaping in a soft sigh. The rise and fall of her breast became a magnet for his eyes. “Ashley is my witness.”

“That woman is crazy. She don’t know a thing.”

Ashley? Nick turned and caught Clem staring at Delaney, with a flicker of fury. Was there bad blood between them?

“She was my mother’s best friend. I’d say she knows a thing or two about the situation.” Delaney looked to Nick then, brown eyes flashing like a cat’s. “Either way, you’re not part of the equation, Mr. Harris. I’d kindly suggest you begin searching for another property.”

Sounded like a dismissal to him. Too bad he didn’t take hints well. Nick stood firm. “I offered a fair price for the land, Ms. Wilkins. You should talk to your uncle. There would be enough to go around.”

“This isn’t about money, Mr. Harris. But I imagine that’s something you wouldn’t understand.”

If she was trying to insult him, she was going to have to try harder. “I understand perfectly. But sometimes money supersedes sentimentality.” Nick knew for a fact the taxes were due and for the third straight year would go unpaid. “I’d hate to see you lose this property to a stranger.”

“You’re a stranger.”

Touché, he mused. “But I’m offering you a way to stay connected. Or didn’t he tell you?”

She tapped her uncle with a healthy dose of suspicion. “Tell me what?”

“He’s a liar!” Ernie cried and returned to his seat.

Clem was close at his heel, as though soaking it in like a sponge. Was he concerned about losing his job? Was there a piece in it for him? If so, Nick could use his employment to sweeten the deal. Responding to Delaney, he said, “I offered to split off a hundred acres for the family, land you would keep in the deal.”

“Interesting.” She arched a brow toward her uncle. “But no deal. This property belongs to my daughter. Period.”

“Your daughter?” This was the first he’d heard of a daughter—of Delaney’s, or anyone’s. When she didn’t expound, he turned to the old man for answers. “I thought you and your son owned the property.”

“My son doesn’t own nothin’. That’s my father’s name and me.” He jabbed a crooked finger to his chest. “He’s dead which makes me sole owner. Nobody else.”

“I see…”

“This property is my daughter’s rightful inheritance,” Delaney corrected.

“It ain’t.”

“It is.”

Intrigued by the new twist, Nick asked, “How old is she?”

“Eighteen.”

“Should I be having this conversation with her?”

“Not on your life.”

He forced himself not to laugh. Mother Bear just swaggered onto the porch, claws drawn. But it was just as well. Nick didn’t care who he dealt with when it came to the sale. “Does she plan on keeping the property?”

“None of your business.”

Nick took in the lot of them. Opposition to his proposal was the common denominator that bound them together. But with the old man staring down the edge of his life, Nick doubted he was looking to get rich. Not at this point in the game. He’d bet his resistance had to do with maintaining control. Ms. Wilkins, on the other hand, was looking out for her daughter’s interests, though he suspected neither had the means to manage or pay for the horses, let alone the taxes and upkeep. One of the little nuggets he discovered from the local town clerk was that Delaney had a good head on her shoulders and a thriving bookkeeping business, but not much in the way of cash in her pocket. Then there was the Sweeney fellow. A man who claimed to be the caretaker, but who Nick’s gut told him was anything but. Well, it shouldn’t be too hard to uncover his stake in the game. Usually it began and ended with green.

“The offer stands, Mr. Ladd. It’s good through the end of the week,” Nick added, tweaking the wrench of pressure. Maybe a time table would be the influence they needed. As it stood, they were pretty hard-nosed against it with nothing to do but wait until the tax man cometh! Which could take months, years—precious time Nick didn’t have. Not only was he under pressure from his marketing department, but he’d promised investors this project would be started months ago. Nick handed a business card to the younger man, yet settled his gaze upon Delaney, now comfortably leaning against the railing. “If you have any questions, I can be reached at this number. I’m prepared to double my offer.”

“Not interested,” she said.

Clem Sweeney’s small eyes flared as he grabbed the card from Nick.

“I’ll be in touch,” he said, and walked off the porch and back to his shiny black sports sedan.

Clem removed the laser beam from Nick’s back and turned on Ernie. “That man really trying to buy the property?”

“Yep.”

“Well, you told him no, didn’t you?”

Ernie whipped around like a mad dog and said, “You heard me, didn’t you?”

“Well...” Clem fiddled with the buckle on his grimy overalls and muttered, “Yes.” He took a step back from the old man. “But did you mean it?”

“Course I did.” Ernie shooed him away and shoved the pipe into his mouth. “I always mean what I say.”

Delaney caught the stony flick in her direction and couldn’t care less. Unlike the rest of the crew, Ernie didn’t intimidate her. He infuriated her. “It’s not yours to sell, Ernie.”

“It’s mine, I tell you—it’s mine and you can’t tell me what to do!”

Ignoring his heated outburst, she shook her head. “This property goes to Felicity.” She pushed off from the railing and strode over to him. Delaney bent down so he wouldn’t miss a single word. The stench of tobacco rising from him would have made her gag—if she weren’t so

damn mad. “You made a deathbed promise to my mother that you would give this property to Felicity.” Not her. Of course, not her.

“When did you get so greedy?” he asked, the skin of his balding forehead coloring to a mix of crimson and ash. “Your mother wasn’t like this.”

“My mother kept her word. She expects you to keep yours.”

Delaney knew she’d just made a direct hit, deep into his heart. Outside of his own mother, his sister was the only one who ever loved him. She cherished him and had she still been alive, would be caring for him now. From cleaning his house to laundering his clothes and cooking his meals, Susannah Ladd would have done it all with a light spirit and loving heart. That was her way.

She’d still be taking care of him, too, had he seen fit to take care of *her*. If he had paid for her treatment, her mother would have seen a specialist who could have helped her. But he didn’t. Instead, he’d raged at the doctors for diagnosing her in the first place and refused to give them a dime more. Ribbons of melancholy wound around Delaney’s soul. Her mother died as a result, and it was because of him.

“You gonna let her talk like that to you?” Clem demanded.

“Stay out of this, Clem.” Delaney raised a hard finger and pointed it directly into his face. “This is none of your affair.”

“Listen here, missy, you don’t treat my friends that way,” Ernie interjected. “Why, I have a notion to give this property to Clem. The way he’s been lookin’ after me all these years, he deserves it, unlike the rest of you lazy-good-for-nothings.”

Delaney frowned. Though one wouldn’t know it to look at him, Ernie Ladd was a wealthy man. Not by his own hand, but by his father’s. Grandpa Ladd inherited almost two thousand acres of land—beautiful land—land that became a hot commodity in the world of real estate. One of the most incredible tracts of unspoiled land in eastern Tennessee, it had been in the Ladd family for as long as anyone could remember, giving home to generation after generation. Lush with trees and valleys, creeks and falls and springs, the property became the envy of the state. Everyone had heard of Ladd Springs. Some claimed the springs were akin to the fountain of youth. But with envy came greed. Thirty years back, Grandpa Ladd sold off half of it to a developer. In one day, with the swipe of a pen, mountains and streams that had belonged to her family for over three hundred years were gone. And why?

Because he didn’t want to work anymore. Grandpa Ladd wanted to stay home and make moonshine. What a waste. Not only did he sell a section, but he forbade the extended family from setting the first toe on the remainder. It was his, he said, and his alone. When he died, it went to his oldest son, Ernest Lowry Ladd. Grandpa Ladd made sure of it by putting Uncle Ernie’s name on the title before he passed. Ernie’s brother Albert was a good-for-nothing-loafer and not entitled to a dime, he’d said. And women? Well, according to him, women shouldn’t own property. He viewed them as simply another expense in life, a mouth to feed.

So Ernie Ladd became sole owner of Ladd Springs, inheriting the remainder of his father’s money as well. Delaney knew for a fact there was almost a quarter of a million dollars left in his account, yet he wasn’t paying the taxes. Stubborn fool. Eventually the two issues would cross paths and Ladd Springs would be caught in the middle. “Mom wanted this property to stay in the family and I intend to see that it does.”

Ernie stuck out his chest. “I decide what happens from here.”

No surprise, Ernie was back in full fighting mode. But the saddest part was that he was dying of cancer. Cancer. The doctors told him he had a few years at best, but instead of enjoying his last days on God's green earth, he chose to fight.

Fight—to his dying day. Ernie would rather jeopardize the Ladd Springs legacy than leave it to her. And now he was threatening to give it to Clem?

Delaney shook her head and walked toward the steps. No way in hell would Clem Sweeney take ownership of her home, but at this point, it was a matter for the courts. If Ernie remained firm in his commitment to deny his son Jeremiah any right of inheritance, then Delaney and Felicity were it as the only other blood relatives. In Delaney's mind, there was no reason for him to go back on his promise to his sister. Susannah made him swear that the property would stay within the family and that he would take care of Delaney and Felicity—to which Ernie agreed. Wrote it down so Susannah could see it with her own eyes. Albert would be looked after, of course, maintaining his right to live on the property until his dying day. His two sons were another story. One was in jail, the other on the run.

Jeremiah could certainly contest the transfer, but it was unlikely he would. Gone for twenty years now, he wasn't in the picture and no one around here would draw him in. Even his ex-girlfriend, Annie Owens, wouldn't call him, and *she* claimed to be the mother of his child—the same child she was squawking about getting rights to the property for. As if Ernie would ever agree to giving Jeremiah's offspring rights.

As it stood, if Ernie continued to refuse, it would leave Delaney to deal with the probate process. It was a headache she didn't need, one her mother would have never wanted her to endure.

"I'm going home," Delaney announced. She'd get nowhere arguing another second with the man. "I'll have Felicity come by around eight."

Like a pacifier to a babe, it settled the issue as she knew it would. For all her uncle's bluster and blow, he had a soft spot for Felicity. Delaney rounded the railing and caught the intensity in the gaze Clem fastened on her uncle. It struck her as odd, coming from the dullest tool in the shed. She hesitated. Was she missing something?

When Clem realized she was staring at him, he cleared his expression, replacing it with sugar and sunshine. "Have a good evening, Dell."