
Chapter 1

Bree Phillips was delighted when she saw the glacier pond and lush meadow in the distance. The people, the music, the food, and the regular beer at the guest event set up by the mountain resort she was visiting were boring. She decided to trek to the top of a ridge opposite the activity to observe the scenery from a different perspective. The hike across the wide meadow to the base of the rocky ridge where she began climbing took longer than she anticipated. She was panting as she topped the rise and wished she'd brought along a water bottle. Bree turned back to evaluate her progress and congratulated herself for hiking so far on her own. From her new vantage point, the dually pickups, SUVs, and all-terrain vehicles looked like beetles and flies on the landscape. The people appeared as pinheads and the music was completely out of earshot.

The Dallas debutante stood on the ridge top and believed by standing there, she had proof of her ability to navigate the great outdoors and take care of herself. She wondered why people made such a big deal about the difficulties and dangers of spending time in the wilderness. Bree had her phone in her

back pocket, so what could possibly go wrong? Upon catching her breath, she began threading her way down and through a boulder field that sloped in the opposite direction of the ridge-line where she had been standing. Bree worked her way around one rock, then another and another until she cleared the boulder field and was now well over an hour's climb away from the resort's staff and the festivities. It never occurred to her to notice or make a note of any landmarks she could use to find her way back to the group.

Topping the next rise, Bree was parched and feeling overheated from her exertion even though she wore light athletic shoes, short shorts, tank top and a light cotton long sleeve shirt tied around her middle. Her stubbornness won out over her discomfort, and she continued to press on toward the top of another ridge. Bree wasn't going to be easily deterred from experiencing the adventure she was creating for herself. She was eager to see what lay before her and kept moving. She came to the top of another slope where she carefully stepped over a felled barbed wire fence and briefly wondered why someone would put sharp, rusty wire in the road for her to step on. She continued walking. Bree Phillips was so engrossed in her climb, she failed to notice the dark clouds gathering behind her.

Newton Meyers followed the tracks of the rabbit he was hunting and was easily closing the gap between him and his quarry. Newt loved his life and his solitude and believed people really had little to offer him other than aggravation. He both observed and despised their complete lack of awareness and how their actions often ended up destroying the very things they purported to love. As a former park ranger and game warden, Newt struggled not to seethe whenever he saw

people just ruining everything. He cherished the land, all of it, and he especially loved the Rocky Mountains. The more Newt saw the land being torn up, the more he believed former park ranger and writer Edward Abbey had it right: Leave wild places the hell alone if you genuinely love them.

Colorado's recreational tourism campaign created even more overuse in what he called a 'come live here and destroy everything' campaign. Newt thought a backwoods literacy class should be mandatory before folks were ever allowed on the trails. People had to take hunter's safety classes to shoot a gun, and he was convinced that people easily did more damage by their brainless wanderings than they would have if they were shooting at actual things.

He continued tracking the rabbit for his dinner and was looking for a clue as to the animal's whereabouts. Newt gazed at the sun to get an idea of the time. It was past its zenith, so it had to be nearing three o'clock in the afternoon. He looked around and noticed the clouds were building overhead and were unusually dark, forecasting a gully washer. When rain dropped from the sky like that, the trails filled with water and could become treacherous. Newt wanted to be back to his cabin with dinner in tow by the time the rain cut loose. He knew the rabbit would be looking for a place to rest while the storm moved in, and Newt wanted to do the same. He hoped to find the animal soon, and as he approached a small copse of Aspens, his quarry burst forth from the underbrush. Newt quickly dispatched the animal with his .22 and walked over to the crumpled form. He congratulated himself on the clean kill and the fine dinner he'd enjoy once the rabbit was dressed and roasted.

Bending over to pick up his prey, he noticed the gray color of the storm clouds had deepened to a greenish black. Newt could see lightning flickering within them and decided not to hang around to see how much rain was waiting to drop. He

turned in the direction of his small homestead and kicked his gait into a trot before the rain began to fall in pelting drops. The first wet blotches bounced off his body, and Newt crossed the threshold into his modest space and set the rabbit near the backdoor. He always left his doors open when the storms came through since he loved listening to the rain even though he hated being in it. Newt turned to walk back into the main room of the cabin when a brilliant flash of light showed every detail in the space. The illumination was followed immediately by a crack and boom loud enough to make his teeth rattle.

“Well, my friend, we made it just in time,” Newt said to the rabbit as he walked back to stand by the door where he watched the sheets of rain score the ground and the winds shake the evergreen trees.

Bree became aware of the change in the light when she found it was more difficult to follow the delightful forest trail she had discovered. When Bree first entered the woods, she found the forest enchanting and imagined that fairies and gnomes lived among the rocks and bushes. Bree could see herself as Snow White waiting for her prince to find her, rescue her, and love her forever. Deep down inside, Bree entertained the fantasy of being a princess. She wanted a strong and handsome man who chose to spend lots of time with her. Bree played out fantasies about how he would dote on her and provide for her every wish and keep her safe from the threats and troubles in the world.

Bree lacked nothing in the material realm. Her father always gave her whatever she wanted as far as material things were concerned. He also handed her lots of things she didn't want, especially because she felt nothing he ever gave was without his attaching a considerable obligation. And stuff

wasn't what Bree wanted anyway. She wanted to have a loving connection to her father, but his business ventures were his mistresses and demanded all of his time. His lack of attention toward her always left Bree feeling empty and alone.

She knew she wanted something more for herself but hadn't yet decided exactly what "something more" entailed. All Bree knew was the life she was currently living wasn't it. She continued to walk through the enchanted glen, caught up in her daydream and began to wonder if maybe the mountains held the key to what she wanted. After all, here she was 'roughing it' and the freedom she experienced as her new adventure unfolded was a heady experience.

Bree continued walking deeper into the trees when a frigid wind suddenly kicked up as the sun slid behind the dark clouds. She untied her cotton shirt and quickly pulled it over her arms and shoulders, but the gusts cut right through it. She'd no sooner gotten the shirt over her bare skin when a blinding flash of light, followed immediately by a deafening boom, caused her to scream. She had no idea what to do next. Were trees safe in a thunderstorm? Should she get out into the open? Should she find rocks to hide behind? Bree panicked. She didn't know how to be safe. Before she could decide what to do next, the rain fell all at once, just like it had been poured out of a bucket in the sky. She ran toward the cover of the trees, but as she sprinted across the uneven terrain, her foot hooked into a tree root, and she fell flat, not even having a chance to catch herself. The rain continued to drop in sheets as the trail flooded and water ran over her twisted ankle, soaking her shoes. The deluge drenched the rest of her. She fumbled for her smartphone and pulled it from her back pocket, only to find she had no signal. Bree was desperate now and did what any urban princess in distress would do: she sat up and screamed as loudly as she possibly could, hoping someone would come to her rescue.

Newt was enjoying Nature's show as he watched the rain wash the forest. He was glad to see the late summer moisture since it was sure to inhibit the wildfire danger which was an endless worry to him and a constant threat to his property. He served as a volunteer firefighter and was glad the rain might save him some long days of working a front line.

He listened to the rain fall and let the chill of the wind blow over him. The pounding downpour hit the side of the cabin, but in the distance, he thought he heard another rabbit screaming close by. The eerie sound, like a child screeching, indicated the animal was in trouble. Newt looked down at the rabbit he'd dispatched earlier and decided that having two for dinner would be better than having just one. He was a big guy, and he was famished. If he could get an extra entrée for an easy catch, it might be worth getting a little wet for. Stripping off his shirt and slipping on an old pair of muck boots he used for chores on his property, Newt grabbed his .22 and headed toward the noise emanating from the trees.

He came through the wooded area and found the trail becoming a river as water coursed over it. The screaming continued. Newt's vision followed the sound, but he didn't find an injured rabbit; instead, he found the very last thing he wanted. A drenched and frightened woman was sitting in the gushing stream that had been a trail just moments ago. She was dressed scantily, and the few clothes she had on were pasted to her body. The sky kept lighting up and the thunderclaps were right on the lightning's heels. Each time it flashed, she screamed. Clearly, she was terrified, and Newt was moved to help her. Without thinking a moment longer, Newt started running in his battered muck boots on the uneven surface. It was no easy feat for him to continue lumbering toward her. When Bree saw the strange form staggering in her direction,

she screamed even louder. The thing looked like a Neanderthal.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Newt shouted.

Bree shouted back to him. "Help! I'm hurt! Oh, please don't harm me!" she cried as the stranger came closer.

Newt reached down and carefully lay a comforting hand on her shoulder as he appraised the situation. "It's okay. I'm here to assist, so don't worry. I need to know what's hurt before I try to move you." He could see she was a bit scraped up, and her ankle was starting to swell, but her injuries didn't look life threatening.

Another flash followed by a crash of thunder sounded. She shrieked again as her panic took over. Her responses became hysterical.

"Breathe and tell me what hurts," Newt said, gently trying to coax the answer from her as the rain poured around them.

Bree finally caught her breath and articulated an answer in between her sobs. "I fell. I hurt my ankle."

"Don't worry. I've got you now and I'm here to help you. Come on, I'll get you back to my cabin where you'll be safe and can dry off, and I can tend to your wounds." Newt bent down and picked up the mud-covered woman, turned, and walked in long strides back toward his cabin. The poor thing was terrified and chilled to the bone, and Newt wanted to protect her. Pulling her closer to him to share his body warmth, he briefly wondered if the isolation was getting to him. Why would he want to shield a stranger, especially when he didn't want people around to begin with? He pushed those thoughts aside and carried her to his cabin. The thing to do now was put first things first.

Bree was stunned at how the man just reached down and picked her up like she was a stuffed toy. He was so big and so powerful! She closed her eyes and leaned her head into his chest, marveling at the comfort she felt from the warmth of his body. He held her close and carried her away from the muddy trail, and she didn't have a care in the world just then. He smelled like pine and musk. She looked up to see the face of her champion. His sable hair was tied into a man bun and scruff along his angular face reminded her of a disheveled GQ model. His eyes were so dark they looked like they were made of obsidian. Bree unexpectedly found his wild earthiness appealing; he was exotic and interesting. The man carried her out of the trees, and she saw a cabin that looked not much bigger than a shipping container. Bree hoped that was where he was heading since it had to be dry and warm. She couldn't wait to be inside since the rain was intensifying if that was even possible. The wind was still howling, and the man pulled her in more closely before he vaulted over three steps that led to the screen door at the back of the house. He pulled the door open with one of the hands supporting her and soon brought her into a little kitchen space where he settled her onto a chair.

"Stay here," he told her.

Bree nodded. She was shivering uncontrollably with the cold and the wet trapped in her clothes. She watched him walk across the room and down a little hallway to an area that must have been his bedroom. He returned with a heavy Pendleton blanket and brought it over to her.

"Stand up so I can put this around you," he said in a nonsense manner as he approached her.

"Okay," Bree said trying to control her chattering teeth. She couldn't remember ever having been so cold! And she couldn't recall feeling so compelled to respond immediately to someone's demands.

"You just sit there and warm up while I get some water heated. I'll make you some nettle tea, and then you can tell me all about what happened. I'm Newt, by the way."

"Bree." She nodded and pulled the blanket closer while he set a blue, porcelain-coated metal coffee pot atop a burner on the small stove.

"I don't think you have more than a sprain. I imagine this tea I'm making will take the edge off unless you are in tremendous pain. If you need more relief, I can give you some willow bark." He turned to regard her and was surprised to be taken by her beautiful deep brown doe-like eyes. She was a filthy, soaked mudball, but she was looking at him with those long lashes and a pitiful expression, and his heart did a little flip in his chest. She was an adorable little train wreck!

"Thank you for helping me. It's a good thing you came along when you did. My stupid phone didn't have any signal," Bree managed to blurt out now that her teeth were no longer rattling her jaw.

"Yeah, you don't usually get signals up here. I like that about living here and being off the grid."

"Why?"

"I don't like people being able to find me unless it's on my terms."

"Why?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"And you don't answer them, so what?" Bree snipped. She didn't like how he was so direct and assuming. "How did you find me anyway?"

"I was anticipating I'd find a wounded animal and not a wounded woman. I thought you were an injured rabbit and was coming to get you for my supper."

"Oh!" Bree looked stricken. "You mean you were going to kill a bunny and eat it?"

Newt noticed her horrified expression. “Don’t eat rabbit, huh?”

“Eww! I’m vegan. But I do like to have bacon with my pancakes.”

Newt held her eyes with a stern expression and said, “Bacon is cured pig.”

“Yuck! What do you mean by ‘cured’?”

“I mean they soak it in salt and sugar or maple syrup after the hog is butchered.”

“Are you some kind of barbarian?”

“You just said you’re vegan but eat bacon,” Newt stated as he carried steaming tea in a metal camping cup over to her.

“I know what I said,” Bree lifted her chin, daring him to challenge her.

Newt lifted his eyebrow in response to her attitude. “Anyway, here’s your tea.” He set the cup on the table in front of her and then moved to stand against the wall since his other chair was outside on the porch.

Bree tasted it and screwed up her face into a grimace. “It’s bitter!” she complained.

“Yeah, it probably is. I think I still have some honey.” Newt walked over to a cupboard and returned with a pint canning jar filled with honeycomb. He grabbed a metal spoon from a drawer and stuck it in with the honey before setting it in front of her.

“What’s that?” This time she curled her lip.

Newt again noted her response and could clearly see she was spoiled. “It’s honeycomb,” he patiently explained. “Dip the spoon along the edges to get the honey, and don’t beat up the wax while you’re doing it. I use the comb for other things like candles once the honey is gone.”

“You’re a strange person.” Bree gave him a look like he’d just grown horns.

“And you’re just like most of the other clueless people I’ve

met," he said, except he knew that wasn't quite true. "So, what are you doing up here and why are you so poorly prepared for the conditions?"

"Well, I was at a cookout and decided to go for a hike," she answered breezily.

Newt gave her a stern look. His voice sounded flinty. "Without a jacket, sturdy shoes, a hat, trail map, whistle, or even a water bottle?"

"I guess I didn't know I needed all of *that*." Bree looked down at her hands which she had folded in her lap. She felt embarrassed.

"A cookout you say?"

"Yes, I'm staying at the Mount Goliath Resort. The staffers drove us up to a meadow where we played games and had a cookout. The people were boring, so I decided to take in the sights instead."

"The resort. If you were involved with the activities, I am sure the staff members are missing you by now. I'll bet they started looking for you and had to pull everyone back because of the storm. Did anyone see you leave?"

"No. Why?"

"They don't have any way to know which direction you went and where to look for you. Don't you know you need to tell people where you're headed in case you can't get back?"

"Oh, they said something about that, but I thought I could manage." She waved her hand dismissively.

"Clearly, you did just fine. That's why you're here with a strange man in a strange cabin." Newt's statement dripped with sarcasm. "Where are you from?"

"Dallas."

"Texas? Nothing in the Rockies is anything like Texas! You're lucky I heard you and that you aren't hurt any worse than you are. Where's your accent?"

“I don’t really have a strong one, and it usually only comes out when I’m around other people from home.”

A strong wind gust buffeted the side of the cabin and rain pelted against the windows with renewed force. Bree looked around wide-eyed.

“Well, Bree from Dallas, I need to get you back to the resort. I’m sure they’ll send out a search party in the morning since it’s too dangerous for them to look for you tonight. It’s also too dangerous for me to escort you back right now. I’ll guide you to where you belong in the morning.”

“Why can’t we go back now? Don’t you have a car?” she asked, her voice tinged with annoyance.

“No. Even if I did, I just said it’s too dangerous to go out tonight. The streams will be swollen and possibly impassible. You don’t just go out in weather like this without being able to determine what hazards might be present.”

“So, you’re saying I have to stay here until morning?” Bree said in a higher pitch than she intended.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Oh, are you now?” Bree tipped her chin toward the ceiling and crossed her arms in front of her.

“I am.”

Bree’s eyes narrowed. “I want to go home now!”

“And I just told you that it’s not safe to go back tonight. You are lucky you aren’t my girl. I’d have you over my knee, warming up your sweet behind right about now. Consider yourself lucky. Since you’re a guest, I won’t.”

“You wouldn’t dare do that to someone.”

“I would if I cared about her, and she acted like you just did. I’d have her beet-red bare bottom facing me while she stood in the corner and reconsidered her behavior.”

“You can’t treat women like that!”

“I don’t tolerate childish attitudes. Act like a brat with me, missy, and you get disciplined.”

"You really are a barbarian."

"No. I would be demonstrating a measure of my care and concern." Newt exhaled deeply. "I am not going to spank you. I will, however, fix you some dinner and give you my bed for the night so you can sleep comfortably. Go down the hall to the bathroom and wash up for supper. I'll get you set up for a proper shower after we eat."

Bree stood up, watching him with a wary expression. Newt steadily met her gaze and watched her turn slowly and start walking down the short hallway. The hem of the blanket was dragging across the floor, and she looked like a little girl as she moved out of sight.

Dinner was nothing fancy, but Bree was famished and didn't care when he placed a simple scrambled egg sandwich and some canned peaches in front of her. Newt excused himself to bring in the other chair from the front porch and go dress out the rabbit he'd planned to have for his own supper. He wanted to get them into his small fridge, so when he returned home tomorrow, it'd be ready for roasting.

Bree ravenously downed the sandwich and then began scooping the sweet peaches into her hungry maw. She'd never had something so simple and yet so delicious. Newt returned to the kitchen and was amused when he saw Bree's empty plate and her sheepish expression.

"I guess I was hungry," she said as she looked up at him. "That was really yummy. Thank you."

"I'm going to make a sandwich for myself. Would you like me to fix another one for you?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Bree happily bounced on her chair.

Newt smiled, swished her plate off the table and got to work. Shortly he brought back full plates and set them on the

table. He was delighted to see Bree's eyes light up before she resumed eating with gusto.

The conversation ebbed as they finished their meal. Once both plates were empty, Newt stood up, looked at Bree and said, "I promised you a chance to clean up, so let me get you started with a shower. You can sleep in one of my shirts and a pair of my drawstring pants if that's okay, you'll swim in them, and it's not the high fashion you're probably used to. I'll give you some wool socks to keep your feet warm. The clothes are clean, cozy and dry, and good enough to sleep in."

Bree smiled as she thought about washing off the day's adventure and willingly followed him to the tiny bedroom where he pulled clothes from a dresser and handed them to her. Then he gave her a folded beach towel and washcloth. A large tooth comb sat on top of the stack he gave her. Newt led her to the bathroom and leaned into the tiny shower stall to begin running the water to warm it. He pointed out what bath products he had available for her to use. "You'll have to make this a quick as possible. I store most of my water. Once the tank is used up, I have to bring in more or purify it myself. You have ten minutes, so don't goof around in there or else you'll have shampoo in your hair until I get you back to the resort. I consider wasting water a serious offense."

Bree could see from his stern expression that he meant business, and once he pulled the door closed behind him, she quickly shed her muddy clothes and got underneath the water. The pressure and the temperature weren't as high as she was used to, but she was glad to see the dirty water flowing down the drain. She was dried off, dressed, and combing her hair when Newt knocked on the door indicating that time was up. When she came out of the steamy room, he handed her a new toothbrush. Bree noticed he, too, was freshly washed.

"How did you get so wet?" she asked.

"I washed up outside while you took your shower in here."

"Wasn't it cold?"

"Of course it was, but why use stored water when Mother Nature is providing what I need? That rain is still falling steadily." Newt moved past her and started toward the kitchen. He picked up the heavy blanket he'd wrapped her in earlier. "I put some water to boil on the stove. We can have one of my herbal tea blends before we turn in. A bit catmint tea should do nicely."

Bree cast him a doubtful look.

"Trust me," he said as he approached her with the blanket and wrapped it around her. "It tastes fine, and it will relax you. Go sit down on the loveseat, and I will bring it to you." He gave her a reassuring nod.

Not long after Bree got comfortable, Newt showed up carrying two camping cups and the honey jar in a shallow baking pan he used as a tray which he set on the roughhewn coffee table. The loveseat faced a stone fireplace, and Newt began stacking kindling on the grate before he added a couple of split logs and lit the paper at the bottom of the pile. Once he was certain the flames were strong, he joined Bree and handed her one of the steaming cups.

Bree hesitantly tasted the hot tea and found it satisfactory, even without honey.

"Want it sweeter?" he asked. "I'll add some honey for you."

Bree nodded, and he dipped up the golden honey and stirred it into her cup.

"So, now that you are dry, warm, fed, clean and safe, tell me why you left the resort."

"You can't imagine how boring it was. I couldn't stand it any longer and decided to make my own adventure."

"Which, as I told you, was a foolish thing to do. Didn't anyone ever teach you how to be safe in the mountains?"

“Well, you know I’m from Dallas, so I never really had occasion to learn. I just didn’t think about it.”

“Are you staying at the resort alone?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“My father sent me up here for my college graduation and to get rid of me. He owns that resort and several others, so it wasn’t like he took time to plan anything for me. His employees put everything together, but it was still lame.”

“I’m getting the sense that you and your father don’t have the best relationship.”

“Well, after my mom died, he married his mistress, which is his work. I think he was relieved when Mom was gone because he didn’t have to divide his attention any longer. He left me with the household staff to figure things out for myself. That is until he needed to brand his empire and entertain clients; then, he wants me around since my image is on most of the advertising for his company. He says I’m the face of Exclusive Retreats.” Bree’s voice took on a sardonic edge.

“Are you?”

“Yes, but not by choice. He could have hired someone else to do it, but this way he can control me and make me be his corporate poster child or make me host his stupid parties. Mind you, he only has anything to do with me when he needs me to do something for his business.”

Newt’s voice was soft and sympathetic when he asked, “How long ago did your mom die.”

“I was eight. Like I said, he left me with the house staff. I had a nanny for the first year, but since I didn’t get into any trouble, my father started leaving me with the housekeepers and grounds’ crew. They were always nice to me. I think they may have felt a little bit sorry for me because he was gone for long stretches. I spent most holidays with the staff.” Bree’s lower lip was trembling as she looked down at her hands.

“But it still sounds like you had everything you needed, especially if the staff was good to you.”

Bree lowered her head so he couldn't see her eyes cloud over. “Yes, I had everything I could ever want—except his attention. That's what I really wanted. I still hope for it even though I am grown up now.” She choked back her tears, and once she was sure she wasn't going to cry, she looked up at Newt. “So, what's your story? Why do you hang out here in the middle of nowhere all by yourself?” She took a sip of her tea and looked at him expectantly and then had to look away. His direct gaze pinned her to where she was sitting, and her body flushed with unexpected heat. Now that she was safe and comfortable, she couldn't help but notice how handsome and commanding he was.

“I told you earlier, I'm out here in the middle of nowhere because I like it.”

“Don't you have a job or something?”

“I used to work for the Colorado Division of Wildlife as a Game Warden, but any job in law enforcement wears on a person after a while. I busted up a big poaching ring and helped send a few guys to jail for a long while. At first, I was hoping to promote. Instead, I decided to move to a new area before they get done with their sentences, which is coming up before too long. I decided I didn't want to be around to meet them again. My uncle, on my mother's side, made it possible for me to relocate as he left me a nice and unexpected financial gift. It affords me the freedom to do whatever I want to keep a modest revenue stream going to pay taxes on the property and buy new equipment for making my custom furniture. It also funds the improvements here. My needs are met, and I am happy taking care of myself.”

“Do you know how to build furniture because you're from around here?”

“No. I learned to build furniture on my own when I

was younger. It started out as a hobby and has become a side business. I started specializing with the beetle-kill pine after my friend Owen, who is a native of the area, talked me into moving up her. Owen worked with me to get the poaching ring busted, so we've known each other a while. When I ended up with the money from my uncle, Owen suggested I buy some property here. I like the area and thought it would be nice to know at least one person if I went to a new place. I took him up on his offer five years ago. When I first got the property, there was nothing but old ranch buildings to work with. I've been slowly restoring the original structures and making improvements to the place. So far, I am happy with what I've done and look forward to getting my next batch of projects completed."

Bree pretended to be interested in his plans, but there was something else that popped into her mind when he began talking. She shifted her position to face him directly and looked into his eyes. "But don't you get lonely? I mean, I have the staff at home, and I still feel empty because my father isn't there like I want him to be."

Newt heard the kind concern in her voice. "I rarely find people I like well enough to have around for more than an occasional meal or maybe a couple of beers."

Bree squirmed as she tried to build up the nerve to ask him what she really wanted to know. "I just met you, but I can't help but be curious about something you said earlier."

Newt lifted an eyebrow as he invited her to share. "Yes?"

"You weren't serious about that spanking thing, were you?"

"Of course, I was. You can bet I am determined that any girl I am serious about will behave herself. I believe a genuine and lasting relationship needs not only lots of nurturing, but also clear boundaries. If those boundaries, which I lay down

for her safety and well-being, are not obeyed, then it is my responsibility to discipline her.”

“So, you *are* a barbarian.”

“Look, a disciplinary spanking demonstrates my measure of care and concern for her. If she deserves it, I will spank the woman I love because I cherish her. The swats I administer to her sweet bottom and the resulting sting serves to remind her how much I care.”

Bree's brow furrowed with confusion. Newt reached over and covered her tiny hands with his large, strong ones. His voice softened when he said, “If I spank, it's because I care.”

“I guess I would have never looked at it that way. I've only been threatened with a licking and was always terrified of it.” Bree shifted uncomfortably. His idea of genuine concern and clear governance titillated her, and she hoped he couldn't see her blushing in the firelight.

Newt sensed the change in her demeanor and was beguiled. She was so damn adorable, and it was everything he could do not to pull her into his lap and kiss her. He tried to divert his thinking and noticed the rain was beginning to lighten up. “Hear that? The rain is moving out, so I'll be able to take you back to the resort in the morning. But right now, my girl, you need to get some rest. Tomorrow, we have a long hike back.” Newt stood up, offered her his hand, and lifted her to her feet. “I insist you take my bed tonight.”

Bree looked at him with her wide and beautiful eyes. “But I want to stay up and talk some more. I'm not tired yet.”

“Yes, you are. You've had a big day and need your rest. I'm certain you don't even know how tired you are. Right now, you need someone to make sure you are taken care of.”

Bree pouted as he led her down the short hallway and into his bedroom. He pulled the covers down and patted the bed. “Come on. I'll tuck you in.”

“Tuck me in? Like a little girl?”

“Yes and wish you sweet dreams until morning.” His voice was calm and reassuring.

Bree crawled into the bed and lay down. Newt pulled the covers up to her chin and then tucked the blankets snugly around her form before looking down at her and brushing a stray tendril of hair from her face. “Sweet dreams,” he said before he left the room and pulled the door closed behind him.

Bree wanted to call him back, but the steady drumming of the rain on the roof and the comforting weight of the blankets lulled her into closing her eyes. She was soon breathing softly and fast asleep.