

# **Pursued in the Wilderness**

LORETTA EIDSON



**LOVE INSPIRED**  
INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

## Chapter One



“What is it this time, Nick?” Brooke Chandler looked at her cell and rolled her eyes.

“It’s important. I need to see you immediately,” he said. “Texted my location. A remote cabin in Chilhowee Mountain. Need you to meet me tonight. It’s urgent. And don’t tell anyone where I am.”

“You can’t be serious. You know how I feel about the wilderness.”

“This one time. I won’t ever ask you again.”

Her stomach plummeted. She had avoided the mountains for years. Bears were vicious, and she wanted no part of them. His insistence got the best of her.

“Fine, but you know at thirty-eight weeks, I shouldn’t be going anywhere except to the hospital. If I drive all the way out there, you’re signing the divorce papers.”

“Make sure no one follows you.” His self-inflicted drama infuriated her.

All her countless arguments met with closed ears. Three happy years of marriage drowned out by four grueling years of coping with his addiction that only

grew worse. He'd left her with no other choice. She had to put an end to the turmoil before it affected their baby.

With divorce papers in hand, Brooke scooped her car keys and purse off the counter and stormed out the door. She slid into the car, sent a text to her mom and slammed her hand against the steering wheel, scolding herself for giving in.

Her pulse increased the closer she got to the foothills. The bear attack she'd witnessed eighteen years ago flashed in her mind. If she'd backed away from that cub, the mother wouldn't have attacked the man who tried to protect her. No doubt, it was all her fault. Her knuckles whitened the tighter she squeezed the steering wheel. Hair on her arms lifted. The man lived, but still, she'd caused his pain. She hadn't been in the woods since the incident and had avoided animals altogether, wild or domestic.

Her car's GPS led her along a mountain road. She maneuvered the winding curves where the road grew narrower. The asphalt changed to gravel, and the sun faded behind the trees. Her insides churned. Nick's truck sat at the edge of a pitted gravel driveway. She pulled in beside it and parked.

The ramshackle cabin teetered at the edge of a ravine and looked ready to collapse. Half of the wooden front porch had rotted and caved in. The screen door dangled on one hinge and missing shingles left the rafters exposed. Dust and cobwebs clouded the windows. How had he found this place? The sooner he signed the papers, the better.

She eased onto the unstable porch. He opened the rickety wood door, yanked her inside and slammed it

behind her. The floor creaked with each step. Would it support her weight?

She shoved the papers at him. "Sign these and tell me what's so important."

"I screwed up and lost a bet." He paced and wiped his brow. "They're looking for me. They want their money."

"What does that have to do with me, Nick? That's your problem." She thrust the pen at him. "How many times have I begged you to get help for your gambling addiction? Face your losses and give them what you owe."

"Can't. I'm broke. And now they're coming after our baby before he's even born. Said they'd sell him on the black market as payment for what I owe."

"Don't threaten me like that." Her mouth went dry. "Sign the papers and I'm done." Her hand smoothed over her belly and patted gently. No one would take her baby. She dropped her purse and keys on the small wooden table and marched into the kitchen, where a case of bottled water sat on the dusty kitchen counter. She gripped the edge of the countertop. He couldn't be serious, could he?

She stared into the forest from the cracked kitchen window. A large wasp nest had her backing away. The threat of nightfall gripped her, and an ache hit her low back. She'd stop at the hotel about fifteen minutes away and make the drive home early in the morning.

A sudden thud and the crackling of boards breaking startled her. A rush of stomping footsteps sent her pulse racing into overtime. She spun. A bearded man jerked Nick up by the collar and pressed a gun to his head. Another man clomped around him, holding a handgun

in the air. A third man stood out of sight, but the tips of his brown boots came into view.

“Where is she?” A gruff voice permeated the cabin.

“No. Don’t. I’ll get the money.” Panic rose in Nick’s response. His eyes cut toward her. “Brooke! Run!”

The water bottle slipped from her hand. She darted out the back door, searching for a place to hide.

Her heartbeat thrashed in her ears. Who were they? She stumbled forward and almost fell. Her breath caught in her chest. She grabbed the moss-covered trunk of a large tree just outside the back door and slipped behind it. Her arms wrapped around her protruding belly as she gasped for breath. Her legs shook.

Nick’s words reverberated in her ears. “They want our baby.” She’d half listened and hadn’t taken him seriously. What had he gotten them into?

She peeked around the tree, and her hand scraped across the brittle wooden corner of the cabin. The forest terrified her. She bit her lip. Should she keep running? Had they seen her flee? After Nick yelled her name and told her to run, they had to have known she was there. He had manipulated and lied too many times. She couldn’t trust anyone but herself.

Brooke peered into the depths of the forest. Where were the bears, coyotes and all the other wild animals? Her muscles tensed. She couldn’t do this. She never wanted to return to the mountains. Not now. Not ever. But she had. Big mistake.

Something crashed to the floor inside the cabin. She jumped back and hugged the tree. A loud thud. Shuffling feet, and the sound of a scuffle. Her imagination went wild. Were they beating Nick and slamming him

against the walls? Angry male voices seeped beyond the thickness of the log structure as Nick begged for his life.

“No, don’t, please. I’ll get your money.” Nick’s voice escalated to a high pitch.

The bang of gunfire invaded her ears. Silence.

Her legs caved, and she sank to the ground. She covered her mouth with both hands and smothered the terror-filled scream spilling from her lips. Tears rolled like a tsunami. Had they killed him? Was she next? Would they kill her and her baby? No. According to Nick, they *wanted* her baby. Panic shot adrenaline through her like an electrical charge, and she sprang to her feet. She couldn’t let them find her.

Brooke wiped tears and blinked. The evening sun dipped lower below the horizon, thrusting her into darkness. A coyote howled and branches rustled. How could she survive out here alone?

The men stepped out the back door.

“Zeke. Told you not to kill Nick until we had the girl,” a gruff voice growled. “Lose her and we lose the cash. You get trigger-happy again and you’re done.”

She sucked in a gulp of air. Nick. Dead? That wasn’t the out she’d wanted. She’d loved and trusted him. He’d been a good husband, managed their finances and made wise decisions for their future, until the last four years. Their savings dwindled to nothing, her diamond jewelry disappeared and his work ethics spiraled. She thought he was her forever soul mate, but his actions proved her mistaken. How could she have trusted him implicitly? She’d been so wrong.

Grief consumed her. They *were* after her baby. Nick had told the truth. If only it were another one of his lies.

Images of what could happen to her and Josiah flashed through her mind. Lamaze class taught breathing techniques to use during labor. Would it help keep her from hyperventilating or passing out?

“She won’t get far in her condition.” The man’s gravely voice carried into the quiet forest. He coughed and spat. “Let’s grab flashlights from the truck.” They tromped back inside.

“Can’t risk losing her,” she heard one of them shout from the front of the cabin. A vehicle door slammed. “That kid is our ticket out of here.” There was something familiar about his voice, but she couldn’t place it.

She bolted deeper into the thick forest. Each slap of spindly branches felt like arms preventing her escape. She fought her way through them. Her insides trembled uncontrollably.

Had they followed her to the cabin, or were they hiding? Waiting for her arrival? Maybe they didn’t know she and Nick had been separated.

Mosquitos buzzed around her ears. Didn’t matter. She kept running. Her feet stumbled on the uneven ground and leaves slapped her face. The baby kicked her side. *I know, Josiah. I know. Oh God, please help me.*

Sweat from the mid-August heat soaked her short-sleeved top and rolled down her back. Her capris and sockless sneakers left half her calves exposed. Weeds slashed against her ankles. A quick glance back. Three flashlights shone in the distance, moving slower than she expected. Maybe they assumed she couldn’t run. A dull ache hit her abdomen.

*Don’t go into labor out here.* She paused and took a few quick breaths. The pain eased, and she pushed

deeper into the inky darkness. Flashes of Nick's pacing and warning before he died overshadowed her vision. He'd apologized profusely before their separation and admitted he'd made a lot of poor decisions. But he didn't stop gambling and never admitted he had an addiction.

She stumbled to her knees. Heavy sobs sucked the breath out of her as her fists punched the ground. Nausea threatened. She hadn't wanted him to die, but how could he not know something horrible would happen?

She wiped her eyes with the hem of her blouse and pushed to her feet. With outstretched arms, she felt her way deeper into the woods, making sure each foot landed on level ground. Something pierced her palm. *Ouch!* A thorn, probably. "Please don't let it be a black widow, brown recluse, fire ant or whatever else is out here. I can't stop now," she huffed breathlessly.

Her pulse pounded hard. The mountains were bad enough in daylight, but nighttime heightened eerie sounds. Frogs croaked, crickets chirped and birds chattered. Were they frightened, too? Calling out for help? Another howl from the distance sent weakness down her legs. The constant reminders of wild animals ran loose. Bears, coyotes, wild hogs, bobcats, wolves, snakes. She flinched at every sound.

An unnerving silence fell over the forest. Her knees almost buckled again. Where were the killers? Tiny dots of light from their flashlights shone in the distance. They'd misjudged the adrenaline surge that pushed her forward.

Brooke gulped down another breath. A light breeze blew and chilled her sweaty body. The sound of leaves tossing in the wind eased her somehow. Smoke. A fire?

She squinted in the darkness. There in the distance a light flickered. Hope of survival thrust away overpowering fear. She forced herself to keep moving, one step at a time, being sure-footed. Closer and closer.

How far had she run? Another glance back. Total blackness. Her belly tightened and pulled her to an abrupt halt. She wrapped her arms around her tummy, and focused on breathing. Braxton-Hicks contractions or the real thing? Her instructor warned her these could occur, but would the trauma of her situation and all the running thrust her into labor? *Please, no.* Weakness consumed her. She fought against dropping to the ground again.

“If I ever make it home, I’ll never come here again,” she whispered. “And I’ll never trust anyone again, especially myself.”

K-9 handler Trent Williston shot up from a deep sleep. His heart raced while vivid sounds of sirens wailing, his own labored breathing as he did CPR, the sight and smell of blood and a woman crying bombarded his thoughts and turned his stomach.

He blinked and looked around, swallowing hard. Must have fallen asleep watching the flames dance in the fire. Another guilt-ridden nightmare. When would they stop?

Rex, his black-and-tan German shepherd, jumped to his feet and barked at Trent’s sudden movement. He stood and whined, wagging his tail.

Trent rolled to his feet.

Rex pushed his nose under Trent’s hand. Trent leaned and buried his face in the dog’s thick fur. The canine’s

woody scent proved they were still in the Smoky Mountains.

“We had a good workout today. Good boy, you did great.”

Rex nuzzled Trent’s neck and licked him.

“I love you, too.” Trent stretched his arms to the sky, lowered them and rolled his shoulders. Leaves rustled in the trees with the evening breeze. Smoldering smoke from his campfire assaulted his nose.

Rex roamed the perimeter of the camp, stopping occasionally to mark his territory. Trent paced and listened to the whippoorwills sing their evening song in an attempt to get the nightmare out of his mind.

“Can’t believe we’ve been here five days already. Only two more days of bliss, boy, before we pack up and head home. We’ve got some big decisions to make. Stay with the K-9 unit, move to the training center or transfer somewhere where there are no risks? One thing’s for sure, I won’t renew my EMT license. That should put a halt to delivering another baby.”

Rex jumped and rested his front paws on Trent’s thighs. Trent smirked and petted his fur before pushing him away.

“God was supposed to help in times of trouble. Right, Rex?”

His tactical watch vibrated on his arm. Six twenty p.m. was his normal evening jogging time, but nothing was normal about this camping trip. Too much weighed on his mind and had him distracted. Not a good thing when his job required his full attention. He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out with a huff. Taking a sudden vacation wasn’t like him. But Sergeant Owens had

insisted on a few days off to pull himself together. Who was he to argue?

“Time to liven up the fire.” He glanced at Rex. “I don’t know about you, buddy, but I need a cup of coffee, a can of sausages and a good night’s sleep. Three weeks of restlessness is getting the best of me.”

Rex gave a short yelp and stepped back.

“Guess you’d like fresh water in your bowl and some food. If you behave, I’ll add a drop or two of my coffee.”

Rex trotted over to his empty bowl and looked back.

“You’re too smart for your own good.” Trent poured half a bottle of water into the bowl and the rest over his head. He shook the water from his hair, then combed it back with his fingers and scratched at his stubbled chin. “Should’ve brought my razor. This stuff itches.”

His mind scrolled through all the supplies he’d packed for this seven-day camping trip away from work, friends and, well, pregnant women. Just him and Rex. No special deliveries. He’d estimated just right. Enough food to get them by for the next two days. Not bad for an unplanned escape to the mountains.

A whiff of coffee brought a deep sniff. Trent slid on a glove and grabbed the metal coffeepot off the fire. He poured the liquid energy into his metal cup, sat on the log and took a big gulp. “Whoa, that’s hot. Probably not a good idea if I’m wanting to sleep.”

Rex eased over and plopped on the ground beside him.

He put a bite of mini sausage in his mouth and pulled his cell from his pocket. “Want to listen to Mandy’s message again? No signal out here, but we can still hear her sweet voice.”