

# *The Mountain Man's Mail Order Temptation*

## **Chapter One**

### *Anson*

“You want me to do what?” I pull the phone away from my ear for a moment and look at it as though my grandmother can see me through the connection. She’s getting better with technology but hasn’t figured out video calls. If she could see my face right now, one of us would be in trouble. Unfortunately, I give even odds on who that would be when it comes to Dottie. Her head barely reaches the top of my chest, but when she’s mad, she makes my first drill instructor look cuddly.

“Be our first mail-order bride client!” she says, like she’s announcing bingo night at the senior center. “It’s Perfect Pairings, sweetheart. We’ll find the perfect woman for you.”

“No.” Not just because I don’t want a wife, but who the fuck signs up for a mail-order bride these days? For Christ’s sake, this isn’t the Wild West. I’m not in the market for a butter churn or a wagon wheel, and I sure as hell don’t need a stranger showing up on my porch with dreams of riding into the sunset together.

Her voice turns shrill. “Anson Blackwood, you owe me for all the times I rescued you from that bully in the fourth grade. *And* the time I lied to Jenny Walsh’s mother when you were fifteen, and you’d taken her skinny dipping.”

“I owe the devil a lot more, and he isn’t trying to send me a wife through the fucking postal service.” I swear to God, this is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever had.

“Watch your mouth, young man! I will drive up that mountain and spank your butt.”

“I’m hanging up now. Find some other sucker for your schemes. Call Avery.” My sister always falls for Grandma’s nonsense.

“This conversation isn’t over, Anson.”

Yeah, it really is. “Love you. Call me back when you’ve taken your meds.” She gasps in mock outrage. I can’t help the rusty chuckle that escapes. It’s a strange sensation. Only she and Avery can make me laugh.

“You are a rotten grandson!” There’s warmth and humor in her voice. She knows I’m giving her shit, and at seventy-five, I swear she enjoys it. “I’ll show you medicated. You wait!” She hangs up.

I toss my phone on my kitchen counter, rake a hand through my hair, and blow out a breath. Mail-order brides. Only Dottie can come up with these outlandish ideas. Fortunately, this one will be like all the others. Like the time she wanted to run a psychic hotline for dogs, then got mad when no one called. Or when she took an around the world cruise for the sole purpose of setting Avery up with her boss. She’ll get bored when she doesn’t have any takers and move on.

I stoop to crawl under the kitchen sink, picking up the pipe wrench to fix the ancient plumbing. My cabin is finally starting to feel like mine. Took almost a year and a half to turn it from a raccoon-infested hellhole to a livable space. I’ve sanded floorboards, replaced countertops, fixed the roof with Ezra and a couple of other ex-military guys who’ve made their homes on this ridge. The porch is still crooked, but that gives it character. Gives *me* something to lean against while I drink my coffee and block out the rest of the world.

I didn’t move out here for company. I left my whole life behind to get the hell away from people, not invite them into a place that finally feels like a sanctuary. It’s safer for everyone that way.

I don’t need a woman. Especially not one picked by Grandma and her bingo friends.

I’m fine.

More than fine.

I tighten the joint under the sink and sit back on my heels. Through the open window, wind rustles the pine trees, carrying the faint scent of wood smoke and the sound of a bird chirping. Maybe the same blue jay that’s been harassing the squirrels. Seconds later, I hear an angry squirrel’s chatter in response. They’re in a territorial war over the bird feeder I put on the porch.

Yeah, this is my life. Home improvement and peacemaker to forest animals. Two years ago, I stared down the scope of a sniper rifle every day, dropping one man after another, until their faces blurred and all I had left was the next number on the list. This kind of tranquility

seemed impossible. Now, I can't live without it—the nightmares are too suffocating, the shadows too dark. The last thing I need is Grandma Dottie turning my world upside down with some blue-haired scheme. Life was a lot damn easier when she and Avery were half a world away.

I'm on my knees installing the last cabinet when my phone rings again. I don't get many calls—maybe one every couple of weeks. Twice in one day? That can only mean one thing. I glance at the screen and groan. For a man with my observation skills, you'd think I'd have seen this coming.

“Don't say it,” I tell Avery when I answer.

As usual, my sister ignores me. “I can't believe you turned Grandma down. This mail-order bride venture means a lot to her, and you're *crushing her dreams*.”

I blow out a frustrated breath and lie on my back, staring up at the kitchen ceiling. The cabinets are almost installed. Tomorrow, Ezra helps me put in the new oven and refrigerator. A few other minor projects, like fixing the hot tub on the back porch, and the cabin will be completely restored.

“Are you listening to me?” she demands.

“No.”

“Anson!”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. She's the exact level of shrill as Dottie. It's like they practice together just so they can give me a headache. “If it means that much, I'll give her some money. I don't need a bride.”

“Yes, you do. You're lonely up on that mountain. Lie to yourself all you want, but Grandma and I know better. Love makes life worth living.”

“You should put that on a greeting card.”

She growls at me like an angry kitten. It might be cute if I wasn't so tired from rebuilding this place and now this damn conversation.

She married her boss after she tried to quit, and he refused to let her go. She seems happier now. That doesn't mean everyone needs wedded bliss.

I need my solitude. There's a reason I shouldn't be around people.

Avery and Grandma don't understand that. It's something only my military brothers here on the mountain get, and even they don't know the true darkness within me.

"I'm happy for you, Ava. But that life isn't for me." Usually, using the nickname I gave her as a kid softens her a little. I'm not that lucky today.

"Tell me why. Explain it to me because I don't understand."

"I can't." If she knew the things I've done, she'd never look at me the same. No one would. They'd run in fear, as they should.

I realized years ago that monsters don't hide in the darkness. They create it. It's part of them. Only a fool willingly steps into the shadows to find them.

She huffs and mumbles something about pig-headed brothers. "Fine. Be stubborn. But don't say we didn't try."

She hangs up.

Jesus Christ, I'm being double-teamed by a septuagenarian Cupid and the Goddess of Love. I squeeze my eyes closed, feeling a headache forming. Thank God this scheme will pass.

Dottie wouldn't really sign me up for a mail-order bride against my wishes.

Would she?

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Read the book here: <https://geni.us/ASH-Temptation>