Her Mysterious Mountain Man

Chapter One

Willa

I'd rather be anywhere else but here right now.

Riverstone Manor is as elegant as ever, with the twinkling lights, tables set with fine china, and soft music playing in the background. Guests are in their finest tuxedoes and evening gowns, and servers pass trays of sparkling champagne.

Unfortunately, the special dinner to honor my grandmother has been overshadowed by my family's bickering and insults.

There's nothing quite like death to bring out the worst in a family.

"Willa." An older gentleman who worked closely with my grandmother approaches with a warm smile. "Your grandmother would be so proud to hear that you're considering taking her place at the foundation. With your fresh ideas, I know we could help so many more children."

"Thank you." I take his outstretched hand. "The foundation meant everything to her."

To me as well. She devoted her life to helping foster children find loving families. I want to continue her legacy, helping as many kids as I can.

Uncle Scott appears beside me with Aunt Carol on his arm. My cousin Gina and her boyfriend trail behind them. "Give Willa the reins, and she'll donate more than just the family jewels. She'll bankrupt the entire company." He takes a long swallow of his drink. "Mother should have left it all to me."

I cross my arms over my waist, so tired of this argument. It's as if he thinks I forced Grandma to change her will to benefit me. We never even discussed it! Before Grandma died, we might not have been the happiest family, but at least we were civil.

"Don't be silly, Scott. Helen would have been thrilled to know her jewelry would do so much good," Aunt Carol replies. "The donors are excited about next month's gala and the auction."

The gentleman clears his throat, his gaze landing on me. I shrink under the pity reflected

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there. “Of course. We all are,” he replies.

“Especially now that we’ve decided to make it a masquerade ball,” Aunt Carol adds.

I blink. “We have?”

She turns toward me, her expression apologetic. “I’m sorry, Willa. I meant to tell you. I mentioned the idea to a few committee members, and everyone was so enthusiastic. You know how much people love an excuse to dress up.”

“I’ve been planning the gala for three weeks.” Grandma wanted some of her jewelry auctioned to benefit the foundation, and I’ve been determined to make the event everything she envisioned.

A masquerade wasn’t on the list.

“Nothing else needs to change, sweetheart.” She squeezes my hand. “And I think we’ll attract even more donors this way.”

It could be fun I suppose, and if it helps raise more money, what’s the harm? I manage a small smile. “Good idea.” I just wish she had talked to me about it first.

“Well, I can’t wait to dress up,” my cousin Gina says. Her gaze skates over my burgundy silk gown, with the form-fitting lace bodice and sexy slit. She gives me a fake smile. “You’re so brave, Willa. I could never wear a dress like that if I had your curves. I can only imagine what you’ll choose for the masquerade ball.”

Reed’s gaze lingers on me, though I can’t tell whether he agrees with his girlfriend or he’s bored.

Gina notices, and he quickly looks away.

My throat tightens. I thought this dress looked amazing on me. I felt beautiful. Until now.

They launch into a discussion about costumes for the masquerade, and Gina suggests a couple ridiculous outfits I might wear.

I can’t do this. I can’t stand here and pretend it doesn’t bother me. But I also won’t make a scene. Not tonight when we’re supposed to be honoring the woman who held this family together.

I turn away and rush out the front door.

The late September air has a chill to it, and a light breeze sends leaves cartwheeling over the asphalt in the parking lot.

It’s only when I’m behind the wheel of my car with the doors locked that I can breathe

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again.

My hands shake as I start the engine, some mix of adrenaline, anger, sadness, and tiredness warring within my body. I hate this. I hate the way they make me feel.

Swiping a frustrated tear from my cheek, I start to drive home. Except I don't even make it out of the parking lot before the gas warning light appears.

"Oh, come on!" I groan. Didn't I put gas in the car last week? Maybe it was the week before. I've been so busy with the plans for the gala and the foundation that the days have blurred together.

The streets are empty as I head for the nearby gas station in downtown Woodbridge Falls. Except it's Saturday night, and it's after eleven. The station is locked, and the lights are off.

I glance at my gas gauge, seeing the little line at the edge of the E. There's another gas station up in the mountains. I should have plenty of gas to get there, and even if they're closed too, I'll still make it home. I'm so ready to crawl into my pajamas and forget about tonight.

But it's never that easy.

As I drive up the winding mountain road, my car starts sputtering and jerking, as if it's struggling to climb the hill.

"Oh no, no, no, no, no! Don't do that. Please make it home. Please." I pat the dash like I'm trying to soothe a kid. "You're a good car. You can make it."

It starts to shudder.

"Come on! You can do it. Just a little more." I can't break down out here. Not at night.

The car splutters and dies.

I coast to a stop at the edge of the road and drop my head against the steering wheel. "Why? Why tonight of all nights?"

The car doesn't answer.

I fish my phone out of my little silver clutch, but as my finger hovers over the screen, I pause, unsure who to call. Who I want to drag out of bed to come rescue me way out here.

Not that it matters because my phone has one little bar of signal flickering in and out like a ghost. When I try to make a call, it doesn't go through.

Maybe it will be better outside.

A chilly wind makes my skin prickle as I get out of the car. The surrounding forest is dimly lit by the light of the moon, and the darkness makes me aware of how alone I am. I hold

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my phone up like another twelve inches will somehow magically reach the cell tower better.

It doesn't.

Of course it doesn't.

I'm stranded, I'm cold, I've been humiliated by my family, and now I'm really frustrated. What kind of idiot doesn't check their gas gauge when they drive?

Me. That's who.

I look back the way I came, but there are no headlights in the distance. I'm sure my aunt and uncle will eventually head home to the family house we share, but it could be another hour or more. And after tonight's dinner, I'm not in a hurry to see them.

Do I stay here? Alone. In the dark. On a deserted mountain road?

Isn't this how horror movies start?

Some dumb heroine stuck in her car while the ax murderer lingers?

No, thank you.

I'll take my chances on the road. Even if I freaking freeze.

The brisk walk should keep me warm, right? And maybe my phone will finally work.

I start walking toward the gas station.

It's eerie out here. The moon is half full, illuminating the road and the branches that creak in the wind. An owl hoots in the distance.

Each step in these high heels makes me question whether I'm making the right decision to leave the car behind. They're comfortable enough for a dinner party. They were not meant for hiking up a mountain road.

I step on a small rock, invisible in the darkness, and the heel tips, making me trip. I catch myself before I fall, and continue on.

There's still no signal on my phone, and this road isn't paved as well as I thought. I don't even see the small pothole until my foot drops a few inches lower than I was expecting.

My high heel twists, and I wrench myself upright, arms pinwheeling as I try to keep myself from face-planting on the asphalt.

The heel breaks with a loud snap.

As soon as I'm steady, I step out of the hole and lift the hem of my dress. The silver heel dangles at an odd angle from the rest of the shoe. Completely. Useless.

"No! Not now!" I don't know whether I'm yelling at my shoe or myself as I pull off the

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offending heel and glare at it.

I'm a hundred yards from the car, I'm cold, I still don't have a freaking cell signal, and my shoes have betrayed me to nature!

"Stupid shoe," I growl, chucking it at the closest bush. "Nature can have you!" I hop on one foot to remove the other shoe and throw it after its twin. "Take both!"

And as I stand there, heaving with frustration and maybe a little lunacy, headlights wash over me.

Because the night wouldn't be complete without a last brush of humiliation.

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Read the book here: Her Mysterious Mountain Man

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