

Wild at Heart

BOOK ONE

# Tried & True



MARY  
CONNEALY



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Aaron, the hero in *Tried and True*, is brave, heroic, smart, honorable, and kind. He ended up being very much like the man I named him for.

If you met Aaron—the real one—you’d find that he’s an incredibly likable guy. But when you get to know him, you realize that beneath his charm is great intelligence teamed with wisdom, bound up with a profound work ethic.

It all ties together to make him an extraordinarily fine young man and a wonderful husband for my daughter Shelly. Our family is better for having you in it, Aaron. This book is dedicated to you.





## ASPEN RIDGE

IDAHO TERRITORY, JULY 1866

Kylie Wilde's right hand tightened on the hammer as she stared at her roof. A shingle flapped in the endless summer wind. A storm was blowing in over the Rocky Mountains, blast it. She was going to have to go up there and nail that board down or sleep under a downpour.

She'd slept in the rain before. Nasty. About as nasty as crawling across a steeply pitched roof. Her hand clenched. The hammer rose, and her attitude fell.

The sky was as sullen as her mood with its scudding gray clouds. Rain was coming. She had to fix that roof.

It was a fight to keep from saddling her gray mustang and riding to Shannon's house. Shannon, a year older and softhearted, would help—probably. Kylie had just coaxed her into building a corral around the barn, and a week earlier she'd built the porch. And that was after Shannon

and Bailey, the oldest of the three Wilde sisters, built the whole house.

Carpentry wasn't Kylie's greatest gift.

Truth be told, the roof was about the only thing Kylie had done herself, which explained why it wasn't holding together.

Her sisters had hoped she couldn't get in much trouble just nailing boards in place. Of course, Kylie's nailing was more like trying to scare the nails into the wood than pound them in. Her sisters were just plain better at it, and Kylie didn't mind admitting that.

Since the house and barn were done, and with her own homestead to run, kindhearted Shannon had started showing signs of botheration when Kylie tried to wheedle help out of her.

And Bailey, the oldest of the Wilde women, wasn't a tractable woman on her best day. Kylie shuddered at the thought of going to her for something this simple.

The shingle flapped again, and Kylie could swear it sounded like mockery. Her cabin was laughing at her. The wind was blowing for the very purpose of tormenting her. The branches in the forest around her seemed to clap, jeering at the trouble she faced. The mountains stood in judgment, as if to declare that Kylie Wilde was a miserable failure as a homesteader.

Kylie could hear all of this as she stood, hammer in hand, scowling at her roof. It would be fair to say she wasn't a woman happy with the life that had been shoved like an anvil onto her shoulders.

But whether she was happy or not didn't matter one whit. That flapping board had to be nailed back down.

Not only was the wind going to rip it all the way off, but it was right over Kylie's bed. She was in for a miserable soggy night if she didn't act fast.

She could just drag the bed to the side and put a bucket under the leak, but if she didn't go up and fix it now, she'd have it to do tomorrow. Putting it off did no good.

Gritting her teeth, Kylie tried to think of all the ridiculous manly skills her sisters had taught her. Of course, she could only think of how good she'd always been at avoiding their lessons. Now she needed to dredge up a few of them or sleep under a deluge.

Ladder. She needed a ladder. Except, the one they'd used to build the cabin had been borrowed from cranky old Pa. Talk about someone Kylie didn't want to ask for help! Cudgel Wilde would scold and snarl and in the end make Kylie want to jump on her horse and ride off and never come back.

Thunder sounded in the distance. She had to get on with this.

"How do I get up there without a ladder?" she said to herself. Kylie studied the house. The porch roof wasn't real high, but it was steep. Bailey said the Rockies had heavy snow, and the roof needed a steep pitch or it would collapse under the weight.

There was a chimney on the south side, yet it climbed up the outside wall right to the peak of the cabin.

Her gaze slid down to the stovepipe. She'd managed to fetch a real potbellied stove out to her cabin. Her family thought that was foolishness, but Kylie hated cooking in a fireplace.

That stovepipe was fairly solid. It came out of the build-

ing through the wall, then curved up through the porch roof. Bailey had done it in that strange way, instead of having it go straight up. She'd said something about retaining heat and preventing sparks and keeping rain out of the stove.

Kylie hadn't really been listening.

Now she was glad it was close to the edge of the roof. Of course, it was close to the south side edge, and the flapping shingle was on the north side. She could pull herself up using the pipe, and then she'd have to crawl the length of the porch roof once she was up there, with nothing much to hang on to. But getting up was harder than staying up.

Since getting up came first, Kylie focused on that.

"Bailey set that pipe. She does everything perfectly. It'll probably hold my weight." And below the stovepipe was her hitching post. "Shannon did a good job with that, too."

She could stand on the hitching post, and if she stretched, she could reach the edge of the roof. But could she get herself up on it?

Kylie gave the hammer a dark glare and shoved it into the large pocket of her skirt. The weight almost pulled her skirt right off.

Shannon and Bailey might wear britches all the time, but Kylie didn't do it unless she absolutely had to—if she was going to see anyone besides her family—which she mostly never did, so she mostly never wore pants. She dropped the handful of nails in another pocket and looked at the rocking chairs on her porch. Shannon had built them both, and she'd called them ladder-back chairs. They even looked a little like ladders, with four nice even slats up their sturdy backs.

The glides on the bottom would rest on the hitching post.

Then when the chair tilted, the high back would reach the support pillar on the porch, and she could climb it like the ladder it was named for. Simple.

Wrestling the chair down the steps, Kylie fumed that she had to do this herself. She was a woman, for heaven's sake. She hadn't ought to be stuck doing manly work.

Flicking her hair over her shoulder, she enjoyed that she'd grown it long despite the dire warnings from her sisters and pa. She smiled every time she felt it bounce around her shoulders. Except now, of course. Not much to smile about right now.

They didn't think she should be in skirts, either.

Well, she was sick and tired of pretending to be a man. In the privacy of her own home she'd dress and wear her hair as she pleased.

Propping the rocking chair on the hitching post, it tilted until it rested solidly on the porch pillar. The chair back didn't reach the roof, but it rested against the column so that if she stood up on the back, she'd be shoulder-high to the eaves.

She wedged the rocker firmly in place. Staring at the makeshift ladder, Kylie went into the house and dragged out another chair. She set this chair on the ground. No sense using the second rocker. Common sense said a chair that didn't rock would be better used as the one she'd set on the ground as her step stool to the hitching post.

Kylie liked to think she had common sense, but as she looked at her chair-hitching-post-rocking-chair creation she was forced to admit that there was serious room for debate on that. She was glad no one was here to take the opposing side, because she'd probably lose.

She climbed up onto the chair and stepped to the hitching post, which held her weight nicely, thanks to Bailey. So far things were going well.

Easing herself onto the rocker, she prayed it wouldn't shift or break. It was well constructed, thanks to Shannon.

She stood upright. The rocker felt steady mostly. She leaned forward to grasp the back of the rocker and, an inch at a time, walked her hands up until she reached first the porch pillar, then the edge of the roof. The chair wobbled, and she clawed at the eaves and let her weight, at shoulder level, rest on them to keep from falling. The stovepipe was straight ahead, a long stretch. She wriggled forward, letting go of the edge of the roof and laying her arms on the roof, reaching for that pipe. She wormed her way forward, now with her belly on the roof and her feet off the chair. At last she grabbed the pipe.

Clinging to the pipe while her feet dangled, Kylie wondered just how she was supposed to get down from here.

Well, she'd worry about that later. She scooted forward until her pocket caught on the underside of the eaves. The hammer was snagged. Kylie squirmed and tried to get the hammer loose. She definitely should have worn pants for this job.

When she couldn't get loose, she let go of the pipe with one hand and carefully reached down, felt around for the hammer, found it, and tugged at it.

She slid and clung frantically to the stovepipe. There was fabric twisted around the hammer, and she was a while wresting it free of her pocket. Finally she got the blasted tool out and set it beside her on the roof with trembling hands. Honestly, she was shocked to see the shaking. Good

grief, she'd lived through a Civil War battle. How could climbing on a roof bother her so much?

A crack of thunder startled a shriek out of her.

The hammer slid. She grabbed at it, then put it above the stovepipe to keep it on the roof. Having it fall so that she had to climb down and get it and start this whole mess over again was a dreadful thought. She inched forward again, until finally she was all the way up. Her feet no longer dangling. Nothing left to snag.

She looked sideways over the edge and remembered how much she'd hated being up here when she'd shingled the roof. Bailey had come up with her each time and lassoed her to the chimney. Only then could she work without fear of falling.

Well, Kylie wasn't going back for the rope, and that was that.

Her stomach twisted. It took every ounce of her courage just to hang on. The humid July day combined with her fear. Sweat dripped off her forehead, and the breeze told her she'd soaked through the back of her pretty blue blouse.

Finally, just because it was going to be so hard to go back, she forced herself forward. She tried to get to her hands and knees to crawl but was completely unable to do so.

Instead, she used her elbows to crawl forward in a way that reminded her of staying low on the battlefield.

Slowly she worked her way to the flapping board and used about five nails to secure it. Bailey would have needed one.

A gust of wind reminded her again of the strong possibility of rain. Twisting her head, she looked back to the far side of the roof. It wasn't a big cabin, but that stretch

she had to cross to get back to her cobbled-together ladder seemed to be a mile long.

Should she turn around? Should she shove herself backward? Sweat dripped into her eyes, and she swiped her sleeve across her forehead. Fighting a growing desire to cry, Kylie started mentally screaming at her family instead.

Why was she up here?

Why had she listened to Pa when he'd come up with this half-witted scheme to use her war service to find fortune out West?

She knew why. She'd come home from the war exhausted. Traumatized. Pa had said he was going west and demanded that she come along. He'd said he would leave her behind if she didn't come. Like a child who needed her papa, she'd agreed.

A homestead took five years to prove up. But a soldier could take his years of service off those five years. Kylie had served two solid years in the Civil War. She'd thought she was being strong when she laid down the law to Pa. She'd come along and stay until she owned this piece of land in three years and then sell it to him, since he wanted it so badly. Then she'd leave and find a civilized life where no one asked a woman to climb up on a roof and wield a hammer.

Three years. She'd be twenty-three then. That was getting old not to be married and have a family of one's own, though not too old. She could wait those three years to earn that money and set herself up for the life she wanted so desperately. And not with some frontiersman. She wanted a settled country. So she'd put in her time, just like she had served her time in the war, and then she'd get out of here.

Three years and she'd been gone.

Three years until civilization.

Three years to the life she wanted.

Thunder sounded in the distance. She had to get down.

Backward. She'd just do everything she'd already done, only backward. With a disgusted toss, she heaved the hammer to the ground. She didn't have to carry that down with her.

With turtle-like slowness, she eased herself toward the ladder. She hadn't gone far when a crack of thunder sounded much closer. Thunder meant lightning, and here she lay in a prime location for a direct hit from a lightning bolt.

She backed up another foot, then another. Thunder cracked louder, closer. A flash of lightning lit up the noon-day sky.

"Pa!" she shouted, something she'd never have the nerve to do if he could hear her. "When I get down, I swear I'll never do another man's chore as long as I live!"

Her voice broke, and her first tears fell. Well, there was no one to bother about that either, so she'd just cry her fool head off if she wanted to.

She cried and yelled and crawled another foot, then another. Glad she was alone so no one could see she was acting like a madwoman. So sorry she was alone, because confound it, she was going to have to figure out a way to save herself.

The thunder came even closer and louder and meaner.

Kylie wondered if this would be a part of her dreams now. Maybe this would push back the nightmares of battle and bayonets and a man's crushing, dying weight pinning her to the blood-soaked ground.

It would almost be a relief to have a new nightmare.

A sprinkle hit the back of her neck. Just how slippery did a roof get? Could she survive a fall? What if she broke her leg? Would she have to lie in the yard until help came? Or wolves came?

“Dear Lord,” she cried as she glanced at the dark clouds and spoke past them to God, “don’t let me be eaten by wolves because I was too stubborn to ride over to Shannon’s and wheedle her into fixing my roof.”

The sprinkle turned to an icy cold shower, shocking in the summer heat.

Kylie crawled faster and was nearly there when she slipped.

She froze, all except the tears. Those were falling as fast as the rain from the sky. Her sisters would mock her for crying if they saw it, but if they were here she wouldn’t be stuck up on this roof, trying to decide between freezing to death or falling, then lying bleeding but fully conscious while wolves ripped apart her broken body.

She’d never been more disgusted with the Rocky Mountains in her life.

“Three years to earn the life I want,” she shouted at the sky, or maybe at Pa, or maybe even at God. She slipped again and was afraid to move another inch or yell her anger to the sky.

*God, get me down.*

Better to pray to God than yell at Him.

She forced herself to move. She’d done that in the war. She’d learned to after the horror of her first battle and that man, dying, pinning her. She’d been frozen with fear and had never forgotten how useless that was. So the next time

she'd kept going, even while she was terrified. Who'd have thought fighting in the war would prepare a woman for climbing down from a roof?

"Three years to earn the life I want." She said it prayerfully, repeating it this time like a true conversation with God. "Three years to earn the life I want."

At last she reached the stovepipe, grabbed it, and hugged it as if she'd found her mother's arms. Then it took her a long while to work up the courage to do what came next.

A crashing thunderbolt rolled across the sky overhead. The clouds had darkened the day, and she saw the lightning even while staring straight down at the wooden roof.

She craned her neck and took a hard look at the rocker, which was only partly visible over the roof edge. It was right where she'd left it, but would it hold? Had the rain made it slippery? Could she find it with her feet while hanging on to the pipe? Everything was harder going backward.

"Three years to earn the life I want." Definitely a prayer now. She needed more courage than she alone possessed to get down from here. And God was the only one here with her.

Swallowing hard, she remembered the battlefield, remembered how to keep going, and eased herself around, fighting with her tangled skirts. She had to stop clinging to the pipe with her arms and only grip it with her hands. Moving with care, finally, with her arms fully extended, her hips reached the eaves. She pushed out and let her legs dangle over the edge.

No chair.

Breathing in and out to calm herself, she searched with her toes, mindful not to kick the chair. Yet she couldn't

find any purchase with her feet. She slid down farther, letting her arms stretch to their limit, until her belly was on the roof's edge. Still no chair to stand on.

It hadn't been like this climbing up. She'd grabbed the stovepipe right away while her feet were solidly on the chair, hadn't she? She just couldn't remember now.

Thunder sounded again, shaking the cabin a little. How much farther did she have to go? Had the chair fallen somehow when she had her back to it?

How strong was this stovepipe?

Didn't lightning bolts like stovepipes?

"Three years to earn the life I want."

The wind gusted and drove icy sheets of rain nearly sideways. Her whole body trembled with cold and fear and growing exhaustion.

She had to get down off this roof.

One more inch. Still no toehold. Her weight shifted, and she slipped down yet another inch. A scream ripped from her throat as she clutched the pipe with only her fingertips. The pipe groaned under her weight and began to bend.

Finally her toes touched the chair, but her feet skidded on the wet ladder-back. She flailed with her feet to get her balance and managed to kick the chair. She heard it fall to the ground.

She began losing her grip on the pipe, feeling her fingernails scraping along its length, and then lost her hold completely and fell.

Solid arms closed around her legs. "I've got you, miss!"

She slid over the edge.

The confident hold on her legs stopped her from hitting the ground. Then whoever had her gently lowered her to

her feet. Her knees buckled. She sank toward the muddy earth. He swooped her into his arms again and carried her up onto the porch out of the cold rain.

Brilliant blue eyes met hers and echoed with strength and kindness. Looking into those clear blue eyes, she felt safer in that moment than she had since she was eighteen and had put on her britches, sworn her oath, and picked up a musket with her fellow soldiers. *Fellow* being a particularly important word.

She threw her arms around his neck. The only solid thing in the whole wide world. And she cried.