

Wild at Heart

BOOK TWO

Now & Forever



MARY
CONNEALY



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Matthew Tucker in *Now and Forever* is very fun for an uncivilized mountain man. I'm dedicating *Now and Forever* to another Matt. My Matt is intelligent and kind with a good sense of humor. He has a strong faith and is always fun to spend time with. He's got the spirit of a healer, which makes him a great doctor, a generous, loving heart, which makes him a fine husband to my daughter Josie, and extraordinary patience and kindness. A good thing, since he needs those to care for my three precious grandbabies.

Our family is better for having you in it, Matt. And please know that any similarities you find between yourself and the wild man Matt Tucker are all in your imagination.

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ASPEN RIDGE

DAKOTA TERRITORY/IDAHO TERRITORY BORDER

AUGUST 1866

*M*att Tucker could take people for only so long and then he had to get up in the mountains, all the way up where he was more likely to run into a golden eagle than a man. He'd wander in the thin, pure air for a week or two to clear his thoughts. Forget the smell and behavior of men.

He slung a haversack over his shoulder, which had everything in it he needed to live, and rambled up a trail that'd scare the hair off a mountain goat. He'd left his horse behind, wanting to travel light and go places even his tough gray mustang couldn't.

This time it wasn't men driving him to the high-up peaks. This time it was a certain headful of dark curls and a pair of shining blue eyes. Not a *man*—though no

one would admit it—which was so odd he almost turned around.

In fact, he wanted to turn around so bad he walked faster.

That hair, those eyes were why he wasn't paying attention, which was a good way to get a man killed in wild country.

He scooted past a boulder on a trail as narrow as coal-black lashes on bright blue eyes. Then rounded a curve as tight as dark curls—and stomped on the toe of a bear cub.

A squall drew his eyes down. A roar dragged them up. He looked into the gaping maw of an angry mama grizzly. He hadn't heard her or smelled her. Honestly, that was so careless and stupid he almost deserved to die.

She swung a massive paw, and he had no time to dodge. She knocked him over the side of that mountain. Not a cliff, but the next thing to it. He slammed into an aspen.

He bounced off. Dirt flew around him, and he inhaled on a gasp of pain and sucked a mouthful of grit into his lungs. He plummeted.

The next aspen hit so hard his ribs howled in pain. He grabbed for it, trying to stop his plunge. Branches cracked and he lost his hold. Loose stones pelted and clattered, falling along with him.

He snagged. His arms, legs, and back whipped forward, but his haversack held. It saved him.

That was when he heard the roar. It brought his head around.

The mama bear wasn't satisfied with knocking him off a mountain. She was coming, and coming fast, finding a way down somehow. She was running almost as fast as he

was falling, closing on him with teeth bared. He had no time for any crafty plans.

With sickening inevitability, Tucker had no choice but to tear the strap loose from the tree and let himself fall on down, with no idea where the bottom was, only knowing that stopping made him grizzly food.

He rolled on, hitting one tree after another, trying to slow his fall, slamming into trunks. One tumble landed him on his back. He gained his feet, ran a few steps, tripped over a stone, dove face-first, and twisted into a shoulder roll to keep from breaking his neck.

A long, high yell ripped from his throat. Tucker saw no point in being quiet about this.

He hit his head hard enough he thought maybe he heard angels singing, or birds tweeting, or maybe both or neither. The bear roared above the music as Tucker kept on falling. Finally he slammed into level ground and stopped, sprawled flat on his back. He flickered his eyes open, knowing he had to get up and run. The bear was bound to still be coming.

His blurred vision filled with a cap of dark curls and the prettiest blue eyes he'd ever seen.

Well, no. Not *ever*.

Because he'd seen them before on the roof of Aaron and Kylie Masterson's cabin. He wanted to just lie there and look forever.

And then that dratted bear roared, and those blue eyes, looking at him all worried, turned uphill and changed from a look of concern to one of horror.

The pretty little gal reached down, grabbed Tucker by

the front of his shirt, and hauled him upright. What was she going to do, throw him over her shoulder and run? He didn't think that was going to work. He was about six inches taller and outweighed her by a hundred pounds.

But Mama Grizz was coming, so someone was going to have to do something. They couldn't stay here, and Tucker wasn't sure he was up to moving. Of course, he'd only had about two seconds to think about it. He hadn't really tried.

"Hang on!" She shoved him backward, clinging so tight it was like he'd gotten a second pack hooked on.

She screamed.

They flew. There was no more rolling. No more aspens. No more rocks. They soared.

Tucker saw the walls of the cliff rushing past and knew where they were. Worse yet, he knew where they were going to land. "Are you crazy?"

They were falling to almost certain death. He'd just been killed by a woman as crazy as he was. Well, he wasn't killed yet. But it was only a few minutes ahead of them.

The bear roared overhead.

The dark-curled madwoman shouted, "I hope Bailey's not too stubborn to tend my sheep."

"I hate sheep."

They hit the water so hard it was like slamming into granite.

The water took over trying to kill him as it swept him forward, pulled him under, and slammed him into a wall all at the same time, then threw him over another cliff.

That was what he'd recognized on the way down. The Shoshone called it Slaughter River.

Those little dark curls that had him so curious, and the woman they were attached to had just thrown him into the worst stretch of water maybe in the whole Rocky Mountains. What did Tucker know? Maybe in the whole world.

A stretch of river so wild Tucker had never heard of anyone riding through it alive, though he'd heard of a few dead bodies being fished out on the far end.

They hit the boiling foam at the bottom of the waterfall. The first of seven, each one worse than the one before.

Tucker had thought about those curls and had a few confused dreams, especially since Kylie, Aaron Master-son's wife, had said the two folks Tucker had seen were her brothers.

Tucker'd known plenty of liars in his day. Mountain men weren't afraid of making a story better by wandering clear of the facts. So just because a real nice woman like Kylie Masterson said a woman was her brother didn't mean much to Tucker when he was staring straight at a pretty woman. But it did make him wonder what was going on. And right now, whoever this was, clinging like the little leech a man found sucked onto his leg from time to time, was no one's *brother*. She had curves that made that undeniable. And the way she'd squeaked in a girly voice . . . well, he was being held and held tight by a woman, and if he had just a bit of spare time, he'd go right ahead and enjoy it.

No time for much enjoying, unfortunately. But if he lived—which common sense told him he wasn't going to—he'd fit that in later, since he wasn't going to make that escape to the mountains he had planned.

All he could do now was hang on right back and try

to keep them both alive, which he very much doubted he could do. He grabbed the whip he kept on his belt and lashed them together. It seemed like the gentlemanly thing to do.

He slammed up against a rock and was dragged under and took her with him. His attempt to save her might get her killed. Maybe he oughta let her loose. Before he could give that much thought, they went flying again. She screamed in his ear fit to leave him deaf for the rest of his life. Of course, his life probably wasn't gonna be all that long, so what did it matter if he was deaf?

Blast it, all he'd wanted was to go see a few golden eagles. Was that too much to ask?



Matt Tucker.

Shannon Wilde knew who he was while he was still falling down that mountain. She'd recognize that good-looking wild man anywhere. That he was two paces ahead of a mouth-frothing grizzly kept her from giving his looks much thought.

She'd have climbed a tree—she had plenty of time to get away from the bear—except she had to wait for Tucker to fall the rest of the way and take him with her, and that, plus his dead weight, cut tree climbing out of her choices. And that left her with only one option: dive over a cliff.

A miserable option if ever she'd been given one.

She'd grabbed him and jumped, glad that she didn't have much time to think about what she was doing.

They'd lived through the cliff.

They'd lived through the first, second, and third waterfall. They'd lived through two stretches of water churned white as snow and studded with rocks.

And now, though the river was still racing like mad, when she thought she might be able to flip him on his back and drag the poor battered man to shore, he tied her to him—with a whip of all things—so she couldn't get away and swim.

She should've let the bear have him.

"Tucker, no. Untie me."

He wrapped his arms around her, as tight as the whip, as if they weren't tangled up enough already. She knew they'd never get to shore this way. She'd had some experience in the water, thanks to the Civil War. She knew how to rescue a person.

They were going under, so she drew in a chest full of air and sank. The world bubbled as they raced along. Under the icy, clear water, she stared at him. He looked right back. He really was uncivilized. She'd have had as much luck trying to communicate with the grizzly, although the claws and teeth would have been a problem. Tucker was lacking those, thank the good Lord.

He kicked heavy boots, rapping her ankles. But she was protected by her own boots so that no damage was done. She matched those few swimming moves and they surfaced, face-to-face. Gasping for air, rushing along, she tried to be rational.

"I know how to swim. Take this whip off and I can get us to shore."

"No, you can't."

“Yes, I can.”

“Shore is a hundred feet of sheer rock, straight up. There ain’t no shore to climb out on for miles and miles. Hang on for the ride, Miss Wilde.”

She hadn’t been called *Miss Wilde* for years. It was a reminder that she was supposed to be masquerading as a man. In all the fuss, she’d forgotten that. Here she was in britches, with short hair and a man’s shirt and boots, and yet Tucker didn’t seem to have one single doubt in his mind that she was a woman. For some reason, some reason she didn’t understand at all, right this very second she didn’t want to be anything other than a woman.

She looked up at the sheer canyon walls they were being swept along and saw he was absolutely right about getting out. “I seem to have no choice but to hang on, Mr. Tucker. Your whip has made it impossible for me to do anything else.”

“We’ll do better if we don’t get separated. I’m familiar with this stretch of river.”

“Is the worst over?”

Tucker gave her the biggest smile she’d ever seen. Of course she’d never been this close to any man. His animal white teeth looked to be ready to gobble her right up, and she wondered if the grizzly bear might not have been safer after all.

“What’s so funny?”

“The worst, Miss Wilde? You think that was the worst?”

“You don’t have to call me Miss Wilde.”

“So you’re claiming to be Kylie’s brother then, huh? You expect me to believe you’re a man?”

“I’m Kylie’s sister.” Shannon was glad for the britches though, as it was much easier to swim in pants than in a skirt.

Tucker smiled a little wider.

“I said you don’t have to call me Miss Wilde because, considering what we’re going through together, you can call me Shannon. So there’s more to come then?”

“They call this the Slaughter River, and I am mighty afraid there is a lot more to come for you and me. Miss Shannon Wilde, you should have let me go look at the eagles.”

Which made no sense at all.

They roared around a curve and went under. When they surfaced they slammed into a rock wall.

Then they shot into a rock-strewn chute more fierce than anything she’d seen before. Which might explain why Tucker had smiled when she’d asked if the worst was over.

The stony channel blasted them out over a waterfall Shannon would have thought beautiful from a safe distance. As it was, she was too busy screaming to get any pleasure out of the view.