

Out of the Wilderness
Pamela Ackerson

Excerpt

JENNIFER'S head pounded and her foot hurt. Stupid horse.

When she returned to her parent's house yesterday, her mother asked if she could help at the neighbors. The neighbor's son, Dusty, was running late, and couldn't get to the horses before he had to leave for work.

They'd arrived as he was heading toward the back side of the property. She hadn't seen him since she was in high school. She'd watched him take off his shirt and, even from a distance, Jennifer could see there wasn't a breath of fat on the man. All the cuts...hot sauce written all over him.

That's when the horse stepped on her foot. If she hadn't been ogling Dusty like he was her oasis, she would've noticed the horse getting antsy.

Between being in the past, going home to help her mom at the neighbors...from playing *heads or tails* with her friend, Retha—she moaned. Why did they do it with tequila?

Travelling back and forth, past to present, hadn't seemed to bother her physically or mentally.

She'd been walking around for three days trying to find the village. Jennifer wanted to be there, *now*. How was she supposed to meet her future husband if she couldn't get there?

Jennifer's tension increased with each forward step. She felt eyes watching her. Was she being followed? The rustling leaves and the crunching of twigs alerted her to a presence, but she blew it off when she couldn't see anything, dismissing it as nerves.

This morning, she'd confiscated a bow and arrows from her stepfather's collection. She had decided to eat and practice with them. A snap of a twig to her left echoed in the silent forest. When had it gotten so quiet? Mentally kicking herself, she should've noticed that before.

Pivoting slowly toward the direction of the sound Jennifer spotted a wolf. It stared at her, unmoving. Teeth bared, he displayed the lethal weapon that could kill her the instant he grabbed her throat.

With stealth movements, she dropped her satchel behind her. Leaning casually on the large tree limb she grabbed earlier, she waited for the wolf's next move.

The fur was brown with a black stripe running down the center of its backbone; its ears pointed and long, facing her, showing a gleam of auburn tones. It had the build of a German Shepherd, and hopefully, the curious and friendly disposition of one.

Sweat trickled down along the side of her face. She knew, from somewhere deep inside, *knew* she wasn't supposed to move. Jennifer held her breath, rooted against the tree staring back at the wolf.

Should she look away? Was it like staring down a dog?

Their eyes locked until finally, she couldn't bear it any longer and Jennifer looked down. The wolf turned and pranced in the opposite direction.

She expelled a long, relieved sigh.

Jennifer raised her eyes to the heavens and gave thanks. She looked around, knowing she'd lost all concept of direction. The sky had clouded, mocking her abilities to navigate herself southward. The well-traveled trail turned, winding its way to a destination she hoped would lead her to the Seminole village.

Coming upon a small pond, silver sand sparkled at the edge, fresh ground water bubbling from the spring, she searched the area for alligators. Seeing none, Jennifer continued, silent as she could, filling her canteen.

A slew of water moccasins scurried around her feet. Jumping in place and pounding the snakes with the tree limb, she shrieked at the unfortunate serpents closest to her.

A strong hand grabbed her, swung her into massive arms, and carried her away from the water. Dropping her on her backside, the rescuer glared at her.

Pushing her hair away from her face, she stared at the Indian standing before her. His braided hair lay to the side, tied securely by a thong, where two feathers stood tall with shells dangling in straps. His cheekbones were prominent, his nose aquiline and his eyes penetrated her soul. Jennifer's heart pounded in anticipation. Was this him? The warrior she traveled to the past to find?

It was about time!

“¿Dónde está su hombre, mujer insensata, por qué usted está aquí impropetido?”

Jennifer blinked, stunned. "Did you just speak Spanish?"

The Indian nodded. "You are English."

"I'm not Spanish. Can you tell me how far I am from the village?" She stood and brushed off the dirt and leaves from her skirt. Snarling, "You could've been a bit more gentle when you put me down."

"Foolish woman." The Indian shook his head. "Where is your man and why are you here unprotected?"

Raising both hands, palms outward, Jennifer snapped. "Oh, what am I, some sort of target for jerks? Is there an invisible label on me that says, 'send all jerks this way'?"

"You speak English." He frowned. "But make no sense. Where is your man?"

"I have no man," she retorted. "And I don't need one. I'm quite capable of walking to the village without the aid of a man. Will you please tell me how far the Seminole Indian village is?"

"With that sharp tongue, I can see why you don't have a man," he mumbled.

Jennifer raised her eyebrow. "What did you say?"

"The nearest Seminole camp is one day on horseback, two days walking for Indian, many days walking for you."

"What? What do you *mean* many days walking for me?"

Tilting his head, "Why do you seek the Seminole?"

"It's where I need to be." She squinted. "What do you mean, many days walking for me?"

"I've come across your path several times as you walked in circles. I thought you were lost, however, you walked the woods with purpose, like you knew where you were heading."

"I do know where I'm going."

"If walking in circles is what you planned, you have done that very well." He shook his head. "Your walk speaks of confidence, but your path is a jangle of confusion."

"Really." She growled. "Who in their right mind walks in circles?"

He grunted. "Obviously...you do."

"Excuse me?"

"I was watching for your man. Maybe you were guarding the camp?"

"No, I wasn't guarding a camp." She rubbed her twitching eye. "And walking in circles isn't what I planned."

"I'll escort you to the village. You may know where you're going but you don't know how to get there. Simple things have been lost to you." He opened both hands upward. "You don't know where the sun rises and sets. You don't have the knowledge to know the difference between a harmless snakes and poisonous ones, and you sneak up on a pond when you should be making noise."

With a fake smile plastered on her face, she reached for her satchel with her right hand and raised her left. *Simple things have been lost to you.* "Forget it. I'll get there on my own."

The man shrugged and walked toward his horse.

Jennifer's eyes widened. Seriously, he believed her? "Wait! Maybe," biting her lip, "maybe, I could use some help."

The man grunted.

"What shall I call you?"

Turning toward the direction of his horse, he called back to her, "Red Wolf."

Jennifer quickly followed. Red Wolf grabbed her around the waist and lifted her onto his horse before he mounted.

Taking a deep breath, she almost gagged as she introduced herself. "I'm Jennifer."

Red Wolf grunted in response and kneeed the horse in the opposite direction of which she'd been heading.

"Hey! You're going the wrong way!"

"No, my little butterfly, *you* were going the wrong way."

She snorted. "No, I wasn't. I was told to head south and I would get to the village."

"Yes, the village is south of here. You were traveling north...and west...and east...and sometimes you were traveling in the direction you wanted to go. You flitted around like a butterfly."

Thank you for taking the time to read the excerpt from Out of the Wilderness.



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