



Half Moon Hill Preview

The slightly twisted gray metal mailbox that had seen better days was empty. Big surprise. She didn't get a lot of mail. And some days she wondered why she bothered to check it at all.

So what now?

You could drive into town. Go to the bookstore. Stop by the police station and see if Mike's there – God knew it would make her over-protective brother's day if she purposefully paid him a visit.

Or ... she could do something that sounded easier.

Berries. You can pick berries. She'd seen some blackberries on a walk in the woods recently, but they hadn't yet been ripe. Maybe they would be now. *Maybe you can make a pie from them.* Not that she'd ever made a pie in her life. But it seemed like something an innkeeper should be able to do. And if she picked berries today instead of going into town, she wouldn't have to try to fit in and pretend she had life completely under control.

Heading into the large detached garage, which held her 1965 cherry red Mustang and also served as storage space for now, she retrieved one of several brown wicker baskets that had hung from nails on the wall since before her arrival.

A moment later, the scent of freshly blooming honeysuckle met her nose as she stepped from the bright sunlight at the yard's edge into the shaded isolation of the woods. At first, going for walks here had made her uncomfortable – it was one more new experience that had taken a little getting used to. But she'd soon discovered there was nothing to fear, and while the house and her yard were both peaceful, there was something different about being surrounded by the lush green of the woods. The forest was a distinct world of its own, one that couldn't be easily tamed or controlled, and maybe she liked that a little.

She moved past tall, thick, old trees and stepped her way carefully through low lying shrubbery and brush. A glimpse of yellow wildflowers in the distance made her smile – though they were hidden deep in the woods, seeing them meant their beauty wasn't wasted.

Oh God, this place really is getting to you. She'd never thought such deep thoughts, let alone about something as pure as nature, before coming to Destiny.

But if you're changing in ways, it must be because you want to.

She'd just caught the scent of more honeysuckle when something moved up ahead. She didn't see anything – but she'd just entered a particularly dark, shady part of the woods. So she just kept walking. Where were those berries anyway? Hadn't they been right around here? She returned to scanning the low lying greenery around her looking for ripened blackberries.

Aha – there they were! And they looked nice and plump and dark, ready for picking, just like the pictures she'd Googled to make sure.

She'd just started dropping the big, healthy-looking berries into her basket, though, when the brush moved again, much closer to her this time – and she looked up to find ... oh dear Lord, a wildman. The sight paralyzed her, fear numbing every limb.

Over six feet in height and bulging with muscles that gave her the impression he could tear her limb from limb, he emerged through a patch of tall shrubbery, flashing crazy, piercing blue-gray eyes. Unkempt brown hair hung to his shoulders and a scraggly beard covered the bottom half of his face, not quite obscuring the angry scar that slashed its way down one cheek.

Anna lost her breath, let the basket drop to the ground, then began to take instinctive steps backward – promptly stumbling over a large tree root. Her butt collided with the packed earth as she tried to break the fall with her hands. Pain shot through her ankle and she heard a cry of

anguish escape her throat, all the while sensing the rapid approach of the brute who had somehow materialized out of nowhere in her woods.

Get up. Get away. That was what her brain was telling her, but her body wasn't quite obeying. She struggled to get to her feet, but her ankle gave out as she rose, and she landed on her rear again, even harder this time.

She raised her eyes to the hairy beast now stalking her. Oh God, his eyes were still just as crazed! Where on earth had he come from? Her heart beat like a drum in her chest as she flew into defensive mode – *flight* had failed, so that left only *fight* to fall back on. “Who the hell are you and where did you come from?”

Despite the question, she hadn't quite anticipated him replying with, “For God's sake, Daisy Duke, relax,” in a deep, raspy voice that actually sounded ... well, surprisingly confident for a wildman. She'd imagined him communicating more by ... grunting or something.

But wait a minute. He thought she was Daisy Duke? Like from the old Dukes of Hazzard TV show? Clearly, this meant he really *was* crazy, or at least not in his right mind.

Her reaction? Another desperate attempt to get to her feet and get the hell out of here before he attacked her – but it turned out to be just as futile and she ended up plopping painfully to her ass again with an, “*Oomph.*”

“Jesus, woman, stay down already,” he told her. “Doesn't seem like walking's your strong suit.”

She flinched. Whoa. The wildman was actually insulting her now? She huffed out a breath. “I'm injured, you Neanderthal.”

“Well, it's no fucking wonder the way you keep falling down. Sit still, for the love of God.”

She just blinked, doubly stunned now. “Who the hell *are* you?” she asked again. “And what are you doing in my woods?”

His eyes still looked just as menacing, but his answer came with a bit less bite. “I didn't know they were *your* woods. I'm just ... staying in the cabin awhile.”

The cabin? What cabin could he mean? She didn't know of any ...

But then she stopped mid-thought, her jaw dropping. Because maybe she did know the structure he was referring to – but if so, she thought *cabin* a generous description.

She supposed it had been a cabin once upon a time, but it had long since decayed into an old shack that tilted to one side, its decrepit walls covered with ivy. She'd assumed the only creatures inhabiting the place were more along the lines of rodents. Of course, she still thought this guy looked like more beast than man, so maybe that didn't bother him. But ... why the hell would someone live in that place? Was he just some wandering homeless dude? And what was she going to do about him?

When she didn't reply, he narrowed those gray eyes of his to say, "You really don't know who I am, do you?"

Huh. She was supposed to? The fleeting idea that he was some famous rock star who'd decided to run away from it all flitted through her mind as she replied, "No. That's why I keep asking who you are."

"I'm Duke," he finally told her. "Duke Dawson."

Even while seated on the ground, Anna drew back slightly. She couldn't have been more surprised if he *had* turned out to be a rock star. "Lucky's friend?" she asked, utterly bewildered. Because she'd met her youngest brother's best friend, Duke, several times, but ... well, he hadn't looked like *this*.

"Yep."

"So ... you don't really think I'm Daisy Duke," she felt the need to clarify.

And he sighed as if *she* were the one making this a difficult conversation. "Of course not – Anna," he said pointedly as his gaze dropped to her denim shorts.

Oh – they were what people called Daisy Dukes. Sort of.

But even if a few things were starting to become clear, some definitely were not. "What are you doing out here? I mean ..." And then everything she knew about Duke Dawson's situation, gleaned from Lucky, came rushing through her head. Some months back, Duke had witnessed a bad accident. He'd gotten injured. A friend had died. And as a result, he'd sold his business – a biker bar called Gravediggers – and moved to Indiana where he had family.

But apparently that last part wasn't exactly true.

"Let's just say I'm not into being around people right now." *Or into engaging in common hygiene, either, apparently* – but she kept that part to herself.

Rather than respond to what he'd said – because things were awkward enough here and she barely knew him – she replied, “Surely you can understand why I didn't recognize you. Unless you haven't seen a mirror lately.”

“I haven't,” he said. “Not real concerned with what I look like right now.” And his tone warned her not to explore that topic further, which left her flailing about for what to say next – when he solved the problem for her by going on. “You got a problem with me using the cabin?”

Did she? And if she did, was she brave enough to tell him so? “Um, not really, I guess. I just ... well, it's not exactly the Ritz.”

“I don't need the Ritz. Don't need much right now at all except to be left alone.”

Everything about him continued to unnerve her. “Okay,” she said, still more due to feeling intimidated than because it was really okay with her.

“And you can't tell Lucky or anyone else I'm here.”

Once more, she found herself balking from her spot on the ground. Because agreeing to let him stay was one thing – but keeping a secret from her brother, who loved Duke enough that he'd asked him to be the best man in his wedding? That seemed like a lot more to ask. “You want me to lie to Lucky? Why?”

“It's not about Lucky. It's like I said – just don't wanna be around people right now. Wanna be left alone. And that was going pretty well until today.”

She let her gaze widen at his curt tone. The nerve of him. “Yes, it was terrible of me to think I could pick berries on my own property.”

At this, his slate gray eyes shifted to the fallen basket and the berries scattered around it. “You never struck me as the berry-picking type, Daisy Duke.”

“I'm not. Usually,” she admitted. “But maybe I'm trying to be ... more like everyone else here.”

“Also never struck me as the type to go changing just to please other people.”

“I'm not trying to please anyone but me,” she informed him – but still felt judged by a guy she thought in no position to be doing that. “And on that note, I'll just leave you to your skulking about in the woods – or whatever you were doing before I got here.”

After which she pulled her feet up under her and started to stand – only to have her ankle give out once more. “Damn it,” she snapped as her butt connected painfully with the ground yet again.

“I *told* ya to give it up and stay down.”

She flashed Duke Dawson a light sneer. “Well, I can't just sit here forever, can I?”

The excess hair on Duke's face didn't hide his annoyed expression. “Guess I'm gonna have to help you.”

Oh hell. As much as she wanted to end this bizarre encounter, it did indeed look that way. “Sorry to put you out,” she said, her voice thick with sarcasm.

And then Duke Dawson – who still didn't look a bit like Duke Dawson to her – reached a hand down to her. “Don't put weight on the bad one,” he reminded her, and between following that advice and taking his hand, she finally managed to stand – albeit only on one foot.

And as if things weren't awkward enough already, he then bent to smoothly curve one arm around her back and the other beneath her thighs, hoisting her easily into his arms, same as a bride about to be carried across a threshold. She tried to hold in her gasp of surprise but didn't succeed. She'd thought he was going to support her while she limped – not pick her up.

“Put your arm around my neck,” he instructed, and such close contact instantly made her feel ... too warm. She suffered the urge to wriggle free somehow, though she wasn't sure exactly why. Was it because he looked so different to her now, like a stranger, making this seem way too personal? Because being in his grasp brought her eyes so close to the scar on his cheek? Because he was grubby and smelly from living in the woods? But no, it wasn't the last one – since he smelled more ... musky and masculine than dirty. His scent filled her senses as he started toward the shack just a stone's throw away, so blanketed with ivy that it almost blended completely into the forest.

“Wait,” she said, remaining startingly aware of just how close they were. “We're going the wrong way. My house is in the other direction.” She pointed over his shoulder.

“Didn't realize it was you who lived there 'til now,” he said in his usual detached tone. “But I'm not taking you to your house. We're going to the cabin.”

Anna flinched yet one more time, just before she glared into his eyes. Except – yikes, that might not have been the best move. They were looking at each other, their eyes uncomfortably close

given that they barely knew each other, and she was struck by the depth of their color. It made her think of storm clouds, gunmetal – there was something harsh yet stunning there.

But she refused to let that daunt her as she prepared to protest.

“I don't *want* to go to the cabin,” she told him in her most commanding voice – the one she generally saved for Mike and had failed to use successfully so far today. But this time it came out with all the authority intended. “I want to go to my house.” Which suddenly sounded like the safest place in the universe compared to that ramshackle lean-to.

Because it had been bad enough to have the wits scared out of her by some beastly guy in the woods. And it seemed even worse that he was actually carrying her in his arms now. And despite Lucky's affinity for Duke, he could very well be dangerous. Clearly the guy wasn't exactly in a good place in life, after all. Living in the woods? Looking like a wolfman? Acting like she was the one trespassing here? It was one thing to let him help her – but that didn't mean she trusted him. And it sure as hell didn't mean she felt safe letting him take her inside that secluded little shack.

She waited for him to turn around and head the other way, back toward her house. Which was also fairly isolated but at least it sat along a road, where cars occasionally passed by. And where there was a phone.

Yet that was when Duke Dawson surprised her yet one more time, brusquely informing her, “Well, that's too damn bad, Daisy Duke. Since you don't seem to be the one calling the shots here, do ya?”

[Get the *Half Moon Hill* today!](#)