

Mountain Men: Brothers Dupree
Excerpt from Emmett's Violet

That fucking snow and ice storm couldn't have picked a worse time to roll through the mountains of Montana. Beartooth Mountain and the small town of Red Lodge in particular had been hit hardest. Power and phone lines were down throughout the region. Cell towers were sparse and ineffective. A total whiteout. Emergency crews worked diligently to repair the damage, but it could be weeks. It didn't help her situation that her home was located deep in the woods on the side of the mountain. Desolate to say the least, but private as she and her husband liked it.

Violet sat on the back porch of the old log cabin, wrapped in a blanket and seeking comfort with a steamy mug of cocoa. Her head throbbed from all the tears she'd shed. It'd been eight days since Emmett went missing in the hills of Afghanistan. The storm hit the night after she'd been informed of the accident. This was torture. The not knowing. This was supposed to be his last tour of duty before being shipped stateside permanently.

The last she'd heard from Emmett, he was boarding a chopper heading to the airport for home. She'd gotten worried when she hadn't spoken with him since. He'd promised to call when he landed back on American soil. She never got that call. When the phone rang at three a.m. on that fateful day, she'd expected to hear Emmett's voice explaining what had delayed him.

"Mrs. Dupree," Captain Erickson had said in a solemn tone. "I'm calling to inform you that your husband, Gunnery Sergeant Dupree, is missing. We are aware he was supposed to arrive home yesterday, and I felt, as his captain and friend, it was my duty to call and keep his family abreast of the situation."

It's a phone call no family member ever wanted to receive. Somehow she'd managed to scrape together enough courage to speak. "Is he dead?"

"We don't know, ma'am."

The captain had said something else, but she'd heard only select words over the fear thrumming through her veins. "Helicopter crashed," "search party," "doing reconnaissance" and then the call ended. It had taken her over an hour to still the tears long enough to call his folks. They'd been so supportive, suggested she stay with them until Emmett was found. But she couldn't do it, couldn't leave the home they'd worked so hard over the past two years renovating, turning into the perfect place for them. It helped knowing his parents were just a ten-minute snowmobile ride away and if she needed to talk, the two-way radio sat on the kitchen counter. Emmett's mother, Rachel, and his father, Dave, touched base with her every few hours or so to make sure she was fine, that the fire burned and the generator ran.

Every afternoon this past week, Emmett's brother, Cash, had swung by on his snowmobile to cart wood from the shed to the indoor bin so she wouldn't

have to do the hard work. Today, he'd even suggested they target practice with the rifle, which she'd enjoyed and had done very well because she'd kept picturing the word *Afghanistan* in the bullseye. Violet had been grateful for his help. He'd eased her loneliness a tad. But he wouldn't let her assist with the wood. At least lugging wood would have been strenuous and tiring. Maybe tiring enough she'd get some sleep, but she doubted it.

"Keep your chin up, Violet," Rachel had said during their last two-way chat. "He's coming home. That sand pit over there isn't tough enough to take a Dupree."

Violet wished she held the same positive outlook as Rachel or at least a tenth of her strength and conviction. Emmett had been missing for over forty-eight hours before she'd gotten that call. The day after that, the snow and ice storm hit, taking out all forms of communication with the world outside the mountain and now five days more had passed. On a good day, cell phone and Internet connectivity were iffy. The longer this dragged out, the thinner Violet's nerves stretched.

She leaned into the corner of the porch swing, stretching her legs along the cushioned bench. Taking a long sip of the cocoa, she stared across the snow-covered yard to the woods. Rays from the full moon danced upon the virgin-white surface. If Emmett were home, there'd be one big snow angel out there made just for her, instead of a blank sheet of nothingness. She shivered.

"He's coming home," she whispered, holding the cup in both hands close to her chest. She closed her eyes and struggled to shove away the bad thoughts.

After three tours of duty and twenty years of service, it was time, in her opinion, for Emmett to join the civilian world. She'd met him through her brother, Tim, who owned a bar near the Marine base in Oceanside, California. She could see their meeting clear as day.

She'd sat at the corner of the wooden bar, keeping her brother company between him serving drinks to customers. A trio of guys had walked in and sat at the far end from Violet. One of them in particular had the most amazing brown eyes she'd ever seen. Thick black lashes that would make even a cover model envious. His high-and-tight haircut gave him away as military, quite possibly a Marine since Tim's bar was located within a half a mile of one of their biggest bases. Every time those eyes looked toward her, she couldn't help but blush and look away, embarrassed she'd been caught staring at him. But those eyes kept drawing her back to him.

Violet hadn't come there to pick up anyone, quite the opposite. She'd come to visit her brother to recuperate from having finally ended a bad relationship that had lasted two years too many. When Emmett had walked to her end of the bar, she remembered not being able to breathe and she hadn't been able to do anything but stare at him as he moved toward her, back straight, over six feet tall, broad shoulders and a smile that lit his face and gave him the cutest set of dimples. He'd taken the seat next to her and reached for her hand. She'd liked

the way he held it. A gentle strength had oozed from his touch and when he'd spoken, she'd nearly melted like a giddy schoolgirl. That truly was unlike her. She wasn't innocent nor was she a schoolgirl. Nope. She was an educated twenty-seven-year-old woman.

"Hi, I'm Emmett Dupree." His gaze had never left hers. Those eyes had captivated and held her defenseless. "You must be Tim's sister, Violet. He warned us he'd shoot any one of us who made a play on you." He'd leaned closer. The heat of his breath had brushed her cheek as he'd whispered near her ear. "There's something about you that has captured my attention to the point I'm willing to take a bullet just to spend a few moments in time with you."

She'd sat back, putting a bit of space between them, then had placed her palm flat on the center of his chest as she'd leaned forward until their noses had been millimeters apart. Staring into each other's eyes, not blinking, she'd responded, "Marine, that's some pick-up line you've got going there. But I'll let you in on a secret. I've seen Tim shoot. He couldn't hit the broadside of a barn even if he stood directly in front of it." Then she'd done something she never had before in her life. She kissed a stranger, full on, tongue invasion, war of dominance. And he'd responded. Breathlessly, she'd disengaged and shoved him back. "Game on, soldier. You up for the task?"

He'd grinned from ear-to-ear. "Yes, ma'am. I do believe you've met your match."

They'd started dating, become engaged, and married, knowing they'd found their perfect mates. Violet brushed away the tear that memory caused. Emmett brought out her bold, sexual side and loved every full-figured inch of her. If she even suggested going on a diet, he'd bake her a cherry pie and smother it with ice cream. He loved her just the way she was built. Said he liked his wife soft, plump and a bit on the sturdy side. Made for good loving for a man his size, six-foot-five and two hundred twenty-five pounds of muscle.

She pushed the swing with her foot, making it rock. God, she missed him and wanted him home. When he'd shipped out this last time, she'd moved their stuff to the log cabin and had worked furiously to make it their own. Painting, decorating and unpacking. She looked at the undecorated Christmas tree standing in the corner by the front window, waiting for Emmett to help her turn it into something beautiful.

This was supposed to be his homecoming. He'd volunteered to spend the last five months of his career as a Marine overseas in Afghanistan, training a group for their first tour of duty. Since he'd already been there twice, he knew the ins and outs of dealing with the locals, the terrain, the sudden sandstorms, and other shit that happened. He'd felt it was his duty to acclimate the others. He'd said it would be a piece of cake, in for five months and then home for good. Discharged. Retired from the military.

Though she'd only been a part of his life for the last four years, she knew he'd given plenty to the Corps, which made her beam with pride. He was the

perfect Marine. Thinking of him in his dress blues at their wedding brought a smile to her lips. He'd stood ramrod straight, staring at her and smiling broadly, causing his dimples to appear even deeper when her daddy had walked her down the aisle.

"My beautiful Violet. On this day, you are making me the happiest man in the world by becoming my wife." The memory of his vows whispered through her ears. *"I hand my heart to you. Please don't drop it."*

That moment of happiness dissipated as the wind whistled through the trees. Violet tucked the blanket closer, knowing she should go inside before she caught a chill. She wasn't ready to face the emptiness of their bedroom and an oversized king mattress that swallowed her without him.

Violet prayed for Emmett's safe return. She wanted her husband home for good. No one outside of the service truly understood the anguish a military wife and family went through each time a deployment occurred. The gnawing sensation that brewed in the pit of one's stomach, sleepless nights that were endless with a whole lot of prayers spoken for their safety. Being proud of them for serving only went so far in soothing the loneliness and living in fear, not knowing if they'd return in a box or on their own accord.

If she heard one more time that absence made the heart grow fonder, she'd yank the throat from the next person to say it. She'd skipped the last two Sunday services because she was so sick of hearing it, even though she knew the ladies of the women's Bible group meant well. And then there was that odd man, Phil Stokes. It seemed he just happened to run into her everywhere she went in town. Didn't matter what day of the week or the time, he simply appeared, which had started giving her the creeps. Was he stalking her? He couldn't offer enough help to her. It had gotten to the point she was running out of polite ways to say *no thank you*.

A deep void filled her soul with Emmett's disappearance that was worse than living alone through this last deployment. Her heart had been ripped down its middle, leaving a raw open gash in its place. He was on his way home. That helicopter was transporting him to the flight that would be the first in a long journey homeward bound. It never made it. She bit her lip.

Stop thinking about it. He's coming home.

Silence surrounded her with the exception of the low hum from the gas-powered generator located in the garage. It sat under the circuit box inside the first bay door closest to the house. The day before the storm, her father-in-law had been by and made sure the fifty-five gallon upright gas container with an easy-to-use pump handle was completely filled and positioned within reach of the generator. She kept the garage door cracked just a tiny bit to let the fumes escape, but not opened enough for any critters to get in. Not that any were moving around in the six feet of snow that had been dumped by the storm. Usually she enjoyed the snow. Not now, not when she was left without any way to receive word about Emmett.

Maybe not hearing was best. Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve. This was to be their first Christmas spent in their house as civilians. Emmett's discharge papers had been written and given to him the day before he stepped on that flight home. What he'd sworn was a simple training mission had turned into a full-blown nightmare. She rolled her head against the back of the swing and caught sight of something moving fast. She sat upright, stood and moved to the porch railing, chin tilted, watching the tiny twinkle glide across the clear night sky.

Violet closed her eyes and made a wish on that shooting star.

