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THE WILDING OF
EM'S PATH



CHAPTER 1

A CHANGING PATH

CHANGE CAME TO CYNDA'S LIFE in a whisper of spring leaves. She set down the heirloom tomato and stood up, shielding her eyes from the morning sun.

Only a breeze.

But no such luck. The ghost of humanity materialized, floating from the forest to the edge of Cynda's homestead. It was a woman who rose to the height of a young female bear and wore a cinched coat and slim-fit pants. All in black.

"Emily." The stranger lowered her hood to reveal skin the hue of sun-warmed limestone and a ponytail the color of a gleaming black snake. "Professor Nadar sent me."

Cynda shook her head. Words had never come easy to her, but not having talked to anyone for a while now, she was even more speechless. "No Em here," she croaked. *I killed her off.*

"*You* are Emily Berman, and you hide in Eden while the world's hell bound." The woman's energy clawed at Cynda. "The professor says it is time. The project requires your...attention."

Cynda retreated to her cabin to fetch her gun. *Playact like I can shoot someone dead.* Once inside, the heavy door latch thrown down, Cynda closed the curtains, casting the room into an eerie grayness.

Her eyes reached for the 16-gauge on the wall rack before her trembling hands could. Cynda hadn't used the shotgun since she'd scared off the black bear during a drought. *And Momma Bear's wasting*

cubs. Finally, she lifted it down and broke it open, her stomach twisting with revulsion. Still, she made it to her bedroom for a shell. As she wrestled the stubborn dresser drawer open, she admonished herself. *Been so fixated on natural dangers forgot man-made ones. Or woman-made.* She loaded the shotgun, then shuffled back to the main room and opened the door with more vigor than she felt. The tiny woman stood resolutely in the distance.

She's calling my bluff.

“Damn it, Mena.” Cynda slammed the door shut, realizing that she was talking to her childhood imaginary friend, a practice she thought she’d abandoned long ago.

Before she could stop it, she retreated inside herself, sinking deep within.

When Cynda came to, she realized she’d taken one of her little sleeps, another thing she hadn’t done in a while. The fading light told her she had lost the workday. The little sleeps hadn’t scared her until she came to the homestead. She’d never fallen and injured herself. But the episodes had robbed her of time and memories and usually struck when most inconvenient.

At least she’d managed to latch the door and put the gun on the countertop beforehand.

Without looking outside, Cynda felt the stranger’s thorny presence. Her throat thick with worry, she checked the woodstove and stirred the flames back to life. Afterward, she made a light meal of greens, choked down a few chunks of nut bread, then freshened up at the washing bowl and brushed her teeth with her dwindling supply of tooth powder.

Well before she usually did, Cynda went to bed, the shotgun within easy reach. She tried to berate herself into using it—an awful decision, but one that might save her.

Dispose of her. Quick. Before she hooks herself inside and drags me back to hell.

But Cynda already had too many ghosts. She couldn’t bring herself to add another. Not yet.

* * *

Cynda woke, her hand gripping the shotgun stock as if it were a lover's arm. She jerked away, causing the ancient bed to creak. Thoughts of the intruder stuck in her mind, prodding her to get up.

Still wearing yesterday's work pants and ribbed undershirt, Cynda pulled on her long-sleeved denim shirt that fit like a second skin. Breaking her morning routine, she struggled to tame her thick tangled hair. Not that it made much difference; even without a mirror, she knew she still looked wild. *That never mattered before.* But now there'd be eyes on her, and with eyes came judgment.

Picking up the shotgun, she stepped out on the porch to survey her homestead. The shed to the right appeared undisturbed, as did the outhouse to her left that she rarely used. *Guineas would've alerted me to an intruder.*

She felt a flicker of regret. She should have hiked to Coombs's store to ask about replacing the guinea hens after they'd been taken by predators, but she had a poor heart for death and suffering. Once the last guinea disappeared, she'd let matters be.

The predawn stillness was broken by a distant whippoorwill singing night into day. Detecting no sign of the woman, Cynda slipped past the outhouse and went into the shadowed woods where she kept a latrine shovel and water bucket. Her morning business completed, she returned to the cabin.

Cynda seemed to be alone, but something felt off, like when pressure built from an approaching storm. Losing a day's work had set her back, though, and in the wilderness, setbacks killed, so she put the shotgun on top of a nearby rain barrel, then ducked through a gap in the split rail fence and surveyed her crops, hoping that the various deterrents she used—like bee balm, hair shavings, and such—had kept most critters at bay.

"Em Berman."

Panicked at the sound of the intruder, Cynda turned to reach for her gun.

The wisp of a woman stepped out of the charcoal-hued forest.

Cynda laid her hand on the smooth gunstock and breathed through the ripples of nausea.

“Your threats are unconvincing,” the woman said, her violent shivering unmistakable. “You will not kill me.”

“*She* say that?” Cynda wouldn’t speak the professor’s name; the old treachery was still too raw.

“I will not leave. Not until I have what I came for, Em.”

“Em’s dead.” Cynda lifted the shotgun and took aim. “Join her.”

CHAPTER 2

NO STRAIGHT WAYS IN THE WOODS

KADIJA HAD MISJUDGED HER GUIDE. Carl looked old and frail. The skin sagged around his eyes, his hands were dotted with age spots and his hair was thin, but he walked twice as fast as she did on the uneven surface of the dirt road.

They had left his truck in front of a ditch miles back and had soon walked far enough into the woods that the mix of tangy, sweet, and putrid odors assaulted Kadija's nostrils. The scents would've overwhelmed her, except the fiery pain in her feet distracted her.

Kadija breathed a sigh of relief when her guide stopped, removed a folded map from the long pocket on the side of his pants, and spread it on a flat part of the road. He began explaining how to use a compass. But already agitated and ready to go, Kadija wasn't paying attention. She ran her eyes along the dirt road until it disappeared into the trees. In this green hellhole, she couldn't find a horizon. That disturbed her. She relied on horizons.

"Forever in search of a place that will never be found." The old admonishment slipped out, reminding her that the mother she had left behind still found ways of catching up to her.

"Here's where we go off-road," Carl interrupted her thoughts. "Used to be an old path for hauling supplies, but the wilderness reclaimed it. Don't be expecting any straight trail, miss."

“Call me Boar.” Kadija insisted on the use of her crew name. But men like him were old-fashioned when it came to calling a person what they wanted to be called.

“Sure you got all that, miss, about verifying the map’s scale?” Carl met her eyes. “It’s mighty important you know this.”

“Got it,” Kadija lied. She hitched up her daypack and stepped off the road, her sense of urgency more pressing than her physical discomfort.

“It’s real easy to get lost out here,” Carl cautioned. “I’ll take you in a ways, but I won’t be staying. I’m already breaking promises between the Coombs family and that girl.”

“You spoke with Professor Nadar. *She* gave you permission to take me to Berman.”

Em Berman. The intervening variable.

Kadija hadn’t understood Professor Nadar’s note in a research report about *the ECB Effect*. But she didn’t need to. All she needed to know was that her crew chief wanted Berman, and if Grate wanted something, Kadija would make that happen. “It’s time to move,” she snapped.

“Impatience’ll get you into trouble out here.”

“Impatience gets me into trouble everywhere.”

Carl wrestled the map closed and stood up, knees popping like the banger firecrackers used in protests.

“Your GPS won’t work out here. Phone either.” He slid the map back into his pants pocket.

“No GPS. No MoD either,” she said, and lifted the daypack’s straps in a futile attempt to cool her sweat-drenched back.

“Not familiar with that word.”

“It’s not important.” Crew chiefs had banned most communication tech because of digital data being scooped up, privacy violated, and plans compromised in geofencing zones. Now only MoDs—mobile devices loaded with encryption apps—were allowed. She had left her MoD in her car behind Carl’s store.

Carl led Kadija deeper into the woods. Aromas assaulted her, the low notes primitive, almost hostile, and the high notes shrieked in her

nose. She raised her hood and buried the bottom half of her face into her jacket collar, finding relief in her own ripening scent.

Soon Carl outpaced her, his pace exacting, his steps quieter than hers. Kadija crashed through the dense growth, becoming clumsier as fatigue set in. When her boot toe suddenly lodged under something, she ran headlong into her guide.

“Careful, miss.” Carl turned to upright her like a parent would a wobbly toddler. “Break something in these woods, you’re as good as dead. Should’ve made you carry a first aid kit too.”

Kadija regained her footing but not her pride. Furiously, she wiped the sweat out of her eyes. If they weren’t stinging from the salt, she may have told him to stop treating her like a child.

I survived the Christmas Crackdown. What have you ever had to survive, old man?

She pressed her hand against her eyes and waited for the burning to subside.

“Rubbing’ll only make things worse.” A damp cloth was stuffed into her hand. “Use this. Wipe ’em. We’ll stop for a bite. After, we need to pick up the pace. Can’t keep the store closed much longer.”

Once she could see again, Kadija found a downed tree carpeted in plants that looked like a soft place to sit and adjust everything that was digging into her. The moment she sat, though, her supposedly water-resistant pants got soaked.

She jumped back up and wiped her backside. Irritated, she snapped, “Who cares if your store is closed? It’s in the middle of nowhere.” In fact, when she had first arrived at Carl’s store on an unmarked country road, its windows dark and its white wooden siding as gray as the gravel parking lot, she’d thought it was abandoned.

“The only store around gets noticed. I close for a week this time of year. Tend to family business. Should’ve reopened already. Folks know that.” He added ominously, “Crabtree’s not some backwoods town isolated from the world’s dangers.”

“I gathered that from the truck.”

“Say again, miss?”

“Someone came while I waited for you. They drove fast into your parking lot but didn’t stay long.” She’d thought it was going to be a smash-and-grab robbery.

“Whatever you did to escape their notice, that was a good thing.”

Kadija looked away from his gaze and cited Grate’s advice. “You must make yourself small sometimes so that you’ll be overlooked to complete tasks.”

But her shame still lingered. Rather than facing danger head-on, she had stuffed herself onto the driver’s side floorboard like a coward, the accelerator pressing into her ass, the steering wheel bowing her head, and her heart racing as the diesel scent burned inside her nose.

“We’ve got some boys. Patrol’s what they call themselves.” Carl stashed the used damp cloth. “They’ve taken to watching the store. Watching me. Claim to be keeping us safe and sound,” he scoffed. “One’s the son of Crabtree’s sheriff. Fancies himself Patrol’s head. Praise Jesus those boys didn’t snoop around back. I’ve seen that car of yours. You wouldn’t have outrun their truck.” Shaking his head, he continued. “Now, on your way out, you’ll need to check for—”

“She will be with me.”

Carl blew out a breath, and Kadija caught a whiff of his salty frustration. “That girl hasn’t left these woods in...can’t recollect.” He dug into another pants pocket and pulled out a couple of brown strips that looked like they’d been sliced off sundried roadkill. He held out a piece. “Venison jerky.”

She turned her head before her nostrils could catch hold of the savory snack and rouse her stomach. “No, thanks.” She rarely ate on the front lines. Hunger kept her motivated, clearheaded.

“We have a ways more to go. Eat. Keep up your strength.” Carl’s concern drew her gaze.

The moment she met his eyes, she regretted it. Crew life had taught her not to look too closely at another person, to detach from human vulnerability, attach to the mission. The grief in Carl’s eyes told her that he had survived horrors, and that commonality nearly buckled her knees.

“Time to go.” Kadija turned off her emotions like a switch and headed through the trees.

“Wrong way.”

She turned and followed Carl.

Hours later, they stopped. Carl pointed a knobby finger at a metal strand sagging close to the ground and draped in leaves. If there hadn't been so many competing odors, she would have picked up its rusty aroma.

“Bobwire's where I leave you,” Carl said. “Head straight toward the tree line. Cross a creek, you're going the right way. And tell her I'm sorry for betraying her trust.” He held out the map and compass. Kadija snatched them out of his hand, and without another word, he turned and disappeared into the green.

She stood alone in the wilderness, a woman with a mission but without a crew. Before emotions could trip her up, she stepped over the wire and walked toward the scent of fresh water.

CHAPTER 3

WALKING IN CIRCLES

A LONE FIGURE WORKED BEHIND the rough rail fence topped with barbed wire. *Emily Cynda Berman*, according to the few research documents Professor Nadar had allowed her to scan. Kadija's heart pounded.

She moved from the pungent tree for one that was smoother in her nasal cavity and continued studying the woman. The longer she watched, the more her disappointment grew.

The tall, brawny white woman didn't look like the brilliant thirty-something researcher who, according to Professor Nadar, could sniff out hidden agendas and lies. Instead, Berman looked like a column of faded rags with shaggy wheat-colored hair. Even the compound was underwhelming—three wooden shacks, the largest in the center flanked by two smaller ones.

This wasn't a mastermind's fortress. It was a shithole.

"Boar, not everyone grew up in a gated community with wealthy doctor parents," Grate had told her once. "We depend on all kinds of safe houses. Elitism has no place on my crew."

With that admonishment in mind, Kadija ordered herself out of the woods and confronted Emily Berman, who sputtered and retreated without a fight.

Kadija circled back to where she had started minutes earlier, a route that only increased her frustration, and sank to her haunches at the base of a huge tree. She dug out the bag of raisins and peanuts that

Carl had made her take and methodically chewed each piece while observing the compound.

“How the hell is *that* woman the variable.”

Professor Nadar had made Berman out to be a powerful force. Yes, the tall woodswoman had a strong jawline, broad back, and laborer's shoulders, but she seemed spineless, and her sallow skin suggested a vitamin deficiency or an underlying infirmity.

Kadija fumed but maintained her position and observed. She drank only enough to keep her brain sharp, emptied her bladder when it distracted her, and fought off irritation when it became clear that Berman had withdrawn for the day.

Truly a coward.

The woods darkened surprisingly fast, the monstrous trees blotting out the light. To prepare for night, Kadija removed the mylar blanket from her daypack. Before she crawled under it, she stashed the pack—per Carl's firm instructions—in something he'd called a bear sack, hung it from a tree limb, and secured the synthetic cord around the trunk.

At last, she burrowed under the blanket, its foil-like material hissing as she curled into a fetal position. She covered her nose to block out the forest's primeval stench and tried ignoring the ominous stirring of the woods.

“Grate,” she whispered, pretending her crew chief was with her, simply hidden by the shadows, “you better have a good fucking reason for wanting Berman. She looks incapable.”

The sounds of the nighttime wilderness drowned out her voice, reminding her how small she was in this untamed place.

* * *

The morning chill jarred Kadija awake. Or maybe a small reddish creature had actually been pulling at the bottom of her blanket. But when she sat up and looked around, she was alone, stuck between dark woods and the lightening Berman compound.

“Dreaming,” she muttered, but the wild musk haunting her nose told her otherwise.

Shivering from cold and nerves, Kadija threw off the thin cover and jumped in place until she warmed up. After that, she released her ponytail and retied it.

“Do your job,” Kadija ordered herself and stepped out of the woods. But her teeth refused to stop chattering, and she couldn’t stop hugging her body—undermining her efforts to enter the battlefield from a strong position.

Thankfully, Berman proved to be equally unimpressive, particularly when picking up the shotgun. The woman’s disgust for the weapon was evident.

Tired of the theatrics, Kadija said, “Shoot me. Dump my body. No one will come for me.”

“Said I’d be left alone. Betrayed. Again,” Berman grumbled, but she put down the gun on top of a black barrel. Running a hand over her mass of unkempt hair, the woman picked up a basket from the ground and fastened its leather straps around her waist.

“The world is tearing apart, Em.” Kadija used the nickname, but it sounded more like a taunt than a friendly gesture.

“Em’s dead.”

Kadija stepped closer and looked between fence railings. Berman crouched beside a vine-covered trellis and began picking green pods. “Is Emily Berman really dead?”

“Years back.”

A tangle of brackish and sickly-sweet odors rolling off Berman told Kadija that she spoke both truth and fabrication.

“When is the last time you were in the real world, Em?”

“Here’s real.”

“Do you have any idea what is happening?” *With your research!*

“People hurting people.”

Every inch of Kadija’s skin crawled, but before she could respond, Berman spoke. “NDA. You sign one?”

Kadija’s nose caught something sharp and peppery, the fragrance of trickery. “Nadar says it’s time to confront everything. I have come for your story.” She fell back on using the professor’s script; it was supposed to buy her enough time to establish some sort of connection with Berman. But establishing connection was not Kadija’s strength.

“Left that story behind.”

“I read the interviews, the ones you conducted on yourself. You were involved.” *Culpable!*

Berman stopped picking pods, palmed a few wiggling gray worms, and looked at Kadija.

Correction. She is scanning me.

“A day. No more. I give you that, then you leave,” Berman said.

“A day.” Kadija agreed verbally, but not inwardly.

“You work. Help make up for yesterday.”

Kadija climbed between the fence rails. Before she closed in, Berman moved away. “Stay.”

“Where are you going?” Kadija barked.

“Got something to do. Alone. No touching anything.” Berman headed down a row and soon was lost from sight.

Kadija dug out a tight square of folded paper from her inside jacket pocket. Exactly two pages, typed. She wished she had been able to smuggle out more. *Another failure, Grate. You chose the wrong person for this mission.*

She scanned the document, searching for anything she might have overlooked. But she had practically memorized every line, and by the last page, she again concluded that Berman would prove insufficient for the battle ahead.

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