



Hitched! (Whitehorse, Montana: Winchester Ranch)

By B.J. Daniels

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On the run from a killer, Josey had no choice but to accept Jack's proposal. She no longer trusted herself to tell the good guys from the bad, but the handsome, blue-eyed cowboy made her feel safe. Yet it soon became apparent that the sparks that flew between them were anything but fake, and the danger they faced was all too real....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author B.J. Daniels lives in Montana with her husband, Parker, and three springer spaniels. When not writing, she quilts, boats and plays tennis. Contact her at www.bjdaniels.com or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/BJ-Daniels/127936587217837> or on twitter at [@bjdanielsauthor](https://twitter.com/bjdanielsauthor).

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Jack hadn't seen another person in miles when he spotted the woman beside the road. He was cruising along Highway 191, headed north through the most unpopulated part of Montana, when he saw her.

At first he blinked, convinced she had to be a mirage, since he hadn't even seen another car in hours. But there she was, standing beside the road, hip cocked, thumb out, a mane of long, ginger hair falling past her shoulders, blue jeans snug-fitting from her perfect behind down her impossibly long legs.

Jack slowed, already having doubts before he stopped next to her in his vintage, pale yellow Cadillac convertible. Just the sight of her kicked up the heat on an already warm May day.

She had a face that would make any man look twice. He watched her take in the restored convertible first then sweep her green-eyed gaze over him. He thought of warm, tropical sea breezes.

Until he looked closer. As warm as the day was, she wore a jean jacket, the collar turned up. He caught a glimpse of a stained T-shirt underneath. Her sneakers looked wet, like her hair. Her clothes were dusty and the cuffs of her jeans wet and muddy.

He'd seen an empty campground in the cottonwoods as he passed the Missouri River, but it was still early in this part of Montana to be camping, since the nights would be cold. It was especially too early to be bathing in the river, but he had to assume that was exactly what she'd done.

"Going any place in particular?" he asked, worried what she was doing out here in the middle of nowhere all alone. Assuming that was the case. He glanced toward the silky-green pine trees lining the road, half-expecting her boyfriend to come barreling out of them at any minute. But then, that was the way his suspicious mind worked.

"Up the highway." She leaned down to pick up the dirty backpack at her feet. It appeared as road worn as she was.

All Jack's instincts told him he'd regret giving this woman a ride. But it was what he glimpsed in her eyes that made up his mind. A little fear was normal for a woman traveling alone in the middle of nowhere. This woman was terrified of something.

He saw her glance back down the highway toward the river, that terror glittering in all that green.

"Then I guess you're going my way." He smiled, wondering what the hell this woman was running from and why he was opening himself up to it. Any fool knew that a woman on the run had trouble close at her heels. "Hop in."

She swung the backpack to her shoulder, straightened the collar of her jean jacket and shot another look back down the lonesome highway.

Jack glanced in his rearview, half-afraid of what had her so scared. Heat rose from the empty two-lane blacktop. He caught a glimpse of the river below them, the dark surface glistening in the morning sunlight. A hawk squawked as it soared on a current coming up out of the river. A cloud passed overhead, throwing the rugged ravines and gullies choked with scrub juniper and pine into shadow.

As he turned back, she was apologizing for her muddy sneakers.

"Don't worry about that," he said, figuring this woman had a lot more to worry about than getting his car dirty.

As he reached across to open her door, she dropped her backpack onto the passenger-side floorboard and slid into the seat, closing the door behind her.

Jack tried to shove off his second thoughts about picking up a total stranger on the run from beside the road in such a remote, isolated place as he watched her settle into the soft leather.

He couldn't miss the way she pulled her bulging backpack protectively between her feet. The backpack, like her T-shirt, was stained with dirt and splattered with something dark the color of dried blood.

"Name's Jack. Jack Winchester." Then he asked, "I'm on my way to the Winchester Ranch. You don't happen to know the Winchesters, do you?"

"I don't know a living soul in Montana." She took his outstretched hand. Her skin was silky smooth and just as cool. "Josey." Her eyes widened a little, as if that had just slipped out. "Josey Smith."

She'd stumbled on the last name, a clear lie. It made him wonder again who or what was after her. "Nice to meet you, Josey." He told himself he was just giving her a ride up the road as far as the turnoff to the ranch.

Shifting the Caddie into gear, he took off. As they topped the mountain and left the river and wild country of the Breaks behind, he saw her take one last look back. But the fear didn't leave her eyes as they roared down the long, empty highway.

Josey fought to still the frantic pounding of her heart. She didn't want this man to see how desperate she was. She was still shaking inside as she turned up the collar on her jean jacket and lay back against the seat.

She needed time to think. It still wasn't clear to her what had happened back there on the river.

Liar. She closed her eyes, trying to block it all out. But the memory was too fresh. Just like the pain. She could still see the car breaking the dark green surface and sinking, hear the gurgling sound as water rushed in, see the huge bubbles that boiled to the surface.

She'd stumbled and fallen as she scaled the rocky bluff over the river, then worked her way through the pines, not daring to look back. She'd only just broken out of the trees and onto the highway when she'd heard the growl of an engine and spotted the Cadillac coming up the hill. It was the first vehicle she'd seen or heard in hours.

Holding her breath and reining in her urge to run, she'd stuck out her thumb—and prayed. Her only hope was to get as far away as she could. She'd been scared the driver of the Cadillac wouldn't stop for her. She could just imagine the way she looked.

But he had stopped, she thought. That alone made her wary. She tried to concentrate on the warm spring breeze on her face, telling herself she was alive. It seemed a miracle. She'd gotten away. She was still shaking, though, still terrified after the horror of the past two days.

She opened her eyes, fighting the urge to look back down the highway again, and glanced over at the man who'd picked her up. Under normal circumstances she would have thought twice about getting into a car with a complete stranger, especially out here where there were no houses, no people, nothing but miles and miles of nothing.

Jack Winchester looked like a rancher in his jeans, boots, and fancy Western shirt. His dark blond hair curled at his nape under the black Stetson. She glanced down at her own clothing and cringed. She looked as if she'd been wallowing in the dirt. She had.

Furtively, she brushed at her jeans and, unable to refrain any longer, turned to look back down the highway.

Empty.

She felt tears sting her eyes. He wasn't coming after her. He couldn't ever hurt her again. She shuddered at the thought.

Not that it was over. By now California criminal investigators would have put out an all-points bulletin on her. Before long she'd be wanted in all fifty states for murder—and they didn't know the half of it.

Ahead, the Little Rockies were etched purple against the clear blue sky of the spring day. As the land changed from the deep ravines and rocky ridges of the Missouri Breaks to the rolling prairie, Jack watched his passenger out of the corner of his eye. She chewed at her lower lip, stealing glances in the side mirror at the highway behind them. She had him looking back, as well.

Fortunately, the two-lane was empty.

As he neared the turnoff to the ranch, Jack realized he couldn't just put her out beside the road. He couldn't imagine how she came to be hitchhiking, but his every instinct told him she was in danger.

He could only assume it was from some man she'd hooked up with and later regretted. Whoever was after her, Jack didn't want him or her to catch up with his passenger.

He knew it was crazy. The last thing he needed was to get involved in this woman's problems. But he also didn't want her blood on his hands.

A thought crossed his mind. He prided himself at thinking on his feet. Also at using situations to his advantage.

And it appeared fate had literally dropped this woman into his lap. Or at least dropped her into his Caddie. Josey couldn't have been more perfect if he'd ordered her from a catalog. The more he thought about it, the more he liked his idea, and he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before he'd agreed to this visit to the "family" ranch.

He glanced over at her. She had her eyes closed again, her head back, her hair blowing behind her in a tangled wave of sun-kissed copper. She was stunning, but beyond that his instincts told him that this woman wasn't the type who normally found herself in this kind of position beside a road, and possibly running for her life.

Jack reminded himself that his instincts had also warned him not to pick her up back there.

He smiled to himself. Taking chances was nothing new to him, nor was charming his way to what he wanted. He'd been told that he could talk a rattlesnake out of its venom without even a bite. He knew he could talk this woman into what he had in mind or his name wasn't Jack Winchester.

But he didn't figure it would take much charming. He had a feeling she'd go for his proposal because she needed this more than he did.

"So, Josey, how do you feel about marriage?" he asked as they cruised down the vacant two-lane headed toward Whitehorse, Montana.

"Marriage?" she asked, opening one eye.

Jack grinned. "I have a proposition for you."

Josey had been taken aback, instantly suspicious until he explained that he was on his way to see his grandmother, who was in her seventies.

"She has more money than she knows what to do with and lives on a huge ranch to the east of here," Jack said. "You'd be doing me a huge favor, and I'd make it worth your while. The ranch is sixty miles from the nearest town and a good ten from the nearest neighbor."

A remote ranch. Could she really get this lucky? He was offering her exactly what she needed, as if he knew how desperate she was. Was it that obvious?...

Users Review

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