

Gold Creek

“Shoot me. Go ahead, shoot me,” I hissed, not caring if he did. Then, I covered the lure of my long hair with my hood, turned, and moved away. I was willing to do this—for Gretta, as I would be for any of the faceless, young women trapped in a cage of chain-link and razor wire.

It only took a moment of indecision on his part, a moment in which he weighed the wisdom of following me on his own, or using his radio to blow the whistle. And, in that moment, the thin, gray fox slipped inside, came around behind him, and held the sharp blade to his throat. The fox had firepower too, but he wanted quiet. We needed quiet.

A large hand clamped over the young man’s mouth. The fox drew him behind a stack of pallets left over from the site’s days as a lumber mill, and forced him to the ground. His arm poised to strike a fatal blow, I stopped him.

“Wait! Don’t kill him. Please. It leaves too many questions. They’ll coming looking. No one cares about a lone woman, even Gretta. They won’t leave all these girls unguarded to come after us.”

The young man lay quiet and still on the ground, not struggling, his eyes darting between mine, and Gretta’s, and the knife at his throat.

“We can’t leave him to talk,” the fox growled.

“I know. We’ll take him with us. Hurry. We’ve been here too long already. Our luck might not hold.”

Gretta stood up from where she had been pretending to retch into the weeds. She hurried to the fence and slipped her thin body through the slit he had carefully cut into the fence. Then the fox pushed the guard through, then followed, maintaining the pressure of the blade on the man’s neck.

He reached in his pocket and I held out my hand for the zip-ties. Then I quickly repaired the break in the fence, leaving no indication of a breach.

I handed the fox my scarf and he tied it over the guard’s mouth.

Gretta stood silently, eyes downcast, as she had no doubt been forced to keep them, along with all the other young women, for weeks.

Then, the four of us walked quickly into the trees.

Hidden from view, the fox pulled out his bandana and, handing me the knife, tied the man’s hands behind his back. Only then did the fox pull Gretta into his arms. When she crumpled, he instantly swept her up and carried her like a child into the forest.

Holding the knife at the young man’s back, I followed. Large pellets of freezing rain fell from the sky, then thick, wet flakes, mercifully covering any tracks we might have left. Gretta shivered in the bitter cold. The fox took off his coat, wrapped her in it, and continued on. The

wind whipped down the canyon of the Blackfoot, stinging the sides of our faces. Only after we turned up the Gold Fork drainage was there some relief from the relentless wind.

“Jacob, maybe we should stop at the wall tent. It’s closer. Just for temporary shelter—just until this storm passes. Gretta needs to get somewhere warm. I think she’s in shock.”

“Nope. We’ve got to see this through, all the way, just like we planned. I’m not stopping.”

The fox needed to hunker down in the fortress of his own making, and which he believed he was capable of defending. He wanted to leave no tracks behind for anyone to follow. Soon, we’d all go to ground. One thing I knew for certain—it was going to be a long winter.

I wanted to keep everybody warm and dry and alive, but his mood brooked no arguing. We stopped for a moment to drink water, and the fox offered Gretta some food, which she clutched in her hand but did not eat.

The fox offered our guard/prisoner nothing at all, and, still gagged, of course, he didn’t ask.

Our prisoner didn’t stumble or feign weakness. His eyes were wary but not filled with panic. He kept his head. He kept up. I surveyed him with neutral eyes, having learned, long ago, to trust no one. Perhaps he felt the same.

Three weeks before, I had left my home in the ground cautiously, poking my head up like a ground squirrel to survey my surroundings. Calm, quiet, the normal amount of chatter amongst the birds and small critters who know that silence often means danger. I replaced the sod cover and rearranged the bushes around it. I picked up my foraging baskets and headed downslope to the creek that sustained me. I drank my fill of the cool water, filtering it first into my canteen. I clipped it to my belt and stood up. Walking up the creek a few yards, I gathered some new chanterelles, which seemed to sprout up overnight with the first late September rains.

I came to the rock ledge where I often cleaned and processed my wild harvests, and there it was, like an offering: a cleaned and gutted doe, shot cleanly through the heart with an arrow. I am no longer alone, I thought. And then, someone knows I am here. First, hope, then fear.

I resolved to proceed calmly along my way, gathering the harvest which sustained me, but I wouldn’t go back to my snug, underground shelter tonight. I’d walk a circuitous route up the mountain to my wall tent. I wouldn’t light a fire. It would be a cold camp, but I’d survive. And then, I’d see what came next.

I gathered rose hips and some late service berries. Some fireweed and yarrow to dry for tea. I spread my treasures on a clean, white cloth to dry in the sun, then slipped inside the wall tent. All was as I had left it a few weeks ago after the first hard frost. Inside, it was dry, which pleased me, and warm in the late afternoon sun. But it wouldn’t stay that way. I went to the wooden trunk that kept my bedding safe from the chipmunks and pine squirrels, pulled out the woollens and some soft flannel sheets to line my bedroll. All set up, I decided it was safe enough to light a

small fire outside just to boil water for tea, but I wouldn't light the small wood-stove. Not tonight.

I carried my supplies outside, then gathered some bark-less twigs and a few larger branches bleached by the sun. I didn't want smoke, just a bright flame to make a cup of tea. I set the kettle on to boil and surveyed my surroundings. I saw no fires, no smoke, just a dark haze when I gazed southwest toward the city. Only clear blue sky to the north, likely all way up the Eastern Front to Canada—if it was still Canada.

These hills were dotted with snags from an old burn, with some struggling new growth that, in nearly thirty years, hadn't managed to get itself very far off the ground. These were tough times, for humans and critters and plants, even. Cup in hand, I breathed in and out, and began to relax at last. Then, with no warning at all, he stepped into the clearing.

“Hello, Angevine, I come in peace,” he said, with a brief, disarming grin. But, he didn't look peaceful. He had a pair of grouse by their necks, two weapons, that I could see, slung over his shoulders, and the blade of a knife glinting on his belt. His hair was too long and his body nearly gaunt. It looked like no one had been taking care of him for a long time, including him. And remembering that, a long time ago, it had been me.

I'd met him one night, dancing. Like most women, I didn't go out much and, increasingly, was careful where I went. But it was high summer, and the music drew me out into the warm evening. Darkness would hold off for a few more hours. I'd be alright, I thought.

We recognized each other in some way, the moment our eyes met. Although he must have been a good-looking man, once, the years hadn't been kind to him. He had undeniable strength, and he looked at me like I was still a woman—but not in a way that caused prickles to run up the back of my neck.

His name was Jacob Nelson Driggs. We danced and danced, cowboy jitterbug, two-step and a little waltzing on the slower songs. I ran my hands up his sinewy arms, tucked my hands up under his shirt-sleeves, massaged his biceps. He gripped my sides tightly, the tips of his long fingers digging into the muscle that ran along my spine. I had not been touched this way in years. He did not exactly touch me with tenderness, but I was not a soft woman. I liked the hardness of his muscles, which came from honest work, like my own. We were drawn to each other, and we came together in a serious and straightforward way. This is what I can offer you. It would be foolish to mistake it for something else.

We formed an unspoken alliance that night—two powerful individuals with no hidden agendas—only mutual need, honesty, and respect. As he backed me up against the car, pulled up my shirt, closed his mouth around my breast, his lips tugging at my nipple, I groaned in need and pleasure. It had been a long time. But we both knew what this was, and what it wasn't. We were too old and scarred by life to play games. Just past the half-century mark, both of us—but it didn't seem to matter that night or on the dozens of nights in the months that followed. It was so nice to have warmth and companionship, someone to share my fears with. Someone to help me remember our glorious youth in a time of relative peace.

The season drifted into Autumn. Jacob taught me to shoot and to hunt. We often lay in bed, talking of things far beyond the romance of youth: the need to be vigilant, the need to protect ourselves and the few people we allowed within our defenses.

He never said to me, “I will be here for you.” Instead, he told me, “You’re a strong woman. And you will need to be. I will teach you what I can. If you need anything else, just ask.”

I knew things, too: how to grow, harvest, and preserve; how to make medicines from the native plants that still grew abundantly up in the hills; how to treat injuries and ailments. I’d spent years, now, experimenting with herbal tinctures, and building a stockpile of those remedies I thought held the most efficacy: Oregon grape root, elderberry, barberry, poplar, and linden. Cottonwood bud oil for sore muscles and inflamed skin, and it’s delightful scent of spring.

I shared the things which Jacob expressed an interest in, just as I occasionally shared the harvests of my labor over candle-lit dinners. These were special gifts of my choosing. I stopped short of any notion of taking care of him. If Jacob needed anything else, like me, he would have to ask.

Whether he ever knew it or not, I had loved him once, despite our façade of practicality. Despite his flaws, and, no doubt, my own. I accepted that he’d had a hard life and that it had left scars. I’d tried to find work-arounds, to find forgiveness, and acceptance. I’d tried to understand what it was like to see the world through his eyes—which seemed to remain wary every second.

There was only one thing I could not tolerate. Alcohol made an impulsive and exciting man cross the line into unpredictable and dangerous. And it had happened more than once. This is the gift of fear: with no difficulty at all, it allowed me to turn my back on him and walk away. And I stayed away for a year or more, before the worst happened, before I had to flee the city and run up into the hills where I knew I could survive.

As Jacob was the breaker of my solitude, the invader my canvas fortress, he took it upon himself to speak first.

“What’s it been? Three years?” Jacob approached my small fire, laid the grouse on the ground, another offering—not knowing that I no longer ate the flesh of my fellow creatures, my community of small friends and neighbors who entertained me with the pleasures and skirmishes of their daily lives.

“What are you doing here? And, how did you find me?”

“I’m a good tracker. You know that,” he said, showing a bit of his old bravado. He liked to think that he was more than he was, or, at least, he liked me to think so.

But, I am older and wiser now and trust no one but myself. “How did you know where to look?” I persisted.

“You left a map, remember?”

I did. I had gone out to my favorite spot on the Bitterroot, where I had often taken my sons and my closest friends—and Jacob, too, just once.

On my last day in the city, hurting and alone, I had erected my totem.

I'd placed a map to my hideaway in a waterproof tube, wrapped it carefully in tinfoil, and twisted into the shape of a kingfisher, my spirit animal. I'd perched it on a branch of the tree that shaded my little white sand beach, my peaceful paradise—wired it in securely around the thick trunk. It didn't look out of place there, and, in time, it's shine would weather. Unless the beavers took this tree down, it would sit, unmoving—and the people closest to me would know it was my message to them. They'd carefully pluck the kingfisher from its perch, open the sealed tube, find the carefully-drawn map, and come to find me. That was my hope.

It was a far leap, I knew—but societal breakdown requires extreme measures. House gone to those who took everything from me, the EMP having taken out the phones, alone and wrecked, I didn't have a more reliable choice. No one teaches us how to plan for this. We each have to do the best we can.

“Don't worry. I copied it, put it back. I know it wasn't meant for me,” Jacob said.

I nodded. Good. “Then why are you here?”

He was the last person I ever expected to find me, not because he wasn't, as he said, a skilled tracker and outdoorsman—but because he had no reason to look for me. That was the way we had left things, the way I wanted it. And he had agreed. He had promised to leave me alone, and yet, here he was.

“I'm here, because I need your help. I need someone I can trust.”

And, hearing those words, I opened my walls enough to beckon him to my fire. I went into the wall tent and brought out my second mug. I made him a cup of tea and listened to what he had to say.

He took a warm swallow. “I always said you were a smart woman, Angevine. You've got a good place here. Both of 'em, above and below. Summer and winter—smart.”

The look in his eyes was calm and steady, the way I liked to remember him best.

“And I'm glad you got out while you could. But, let me tell you, the shit has hit the fan. It's total chaos, like nothing you could have imagined. Women aren't safe. No one is. And I knew that. I never left the house. I used all of my skills to let it be known that she was under my protection. I never left her alone.”

“Who?” I interrupted.

“Gretta. When things got bad, she came home. I kept her safe.” And he said nothing else for a few minutes. I knew that he couldn't.

Nodding, I prompted him. “Tell me what happened.”

His eyes filled and glittered with emotion, which is a terrible thing to see in a hard man like Jacob, but he ground it out.

“One day, for no fucking reason, I collapsed, right in my own kitchen. Must’ve been a heart attack. She called for help—and that’s how they found her. That’s when they got her away from me—when I was helpless to do anything about it.” He shook his head, dumped out the dregs of the tea, which could be bitter tasting, and set the cup upside down on the rocky ground.

“I woke up and she wasn’t there. I called out, and she didn’t answer. I got out of bed and went into the living room. It was trashed. They trashed my home—took things that belonged to me. Took my girl. I had to sit down, rest, think. Then, I dragged myself up the stairs to her room and laid down on her bed. Cried my eyes out.”

I placed my hand on his arm, imagining his terror, and his grief. His helplessness. Jacob loved his daughter, of that I had always been sure. We sat in silence until the sun began to slide over the hill, and in late September, this can happen more quickly than you might expect.

I stood up, started to gather our cups and the kettle, to put things right, to leave a clean camp for the night. I was about to turn away, let him have a moment to himself, when he put out an arm. Stopped me. His touch stunned me. I hadn’t felt a human touch in years, and it was electric, as always, but I let that thought pass.

“I know where Gretta is. But I’ll need your help to get her back.”

“You do? How?” I asked.

“All her life, I told her, ‘Leave me a trail. Just leave me a trail and I’ll come get you, wherever you are.’ And, by God, she did. When they came to take her, she must have asked for a minute to run up to her room and get some underclothes, something like that. She must have been thinking of what to do. She reached into her closet and pulled out her white skirt, the one she used to wear when we went dancing. And she laid it on the back of her suitcase, which was by the foot of her bed—she hadn’t yet put it away. That was her message to me.”

Even as I felt a sense of foreboding, I still didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me. I’d been holed away up here for the better part of two years, out of touch with the world. Exactly the way I liked it. I needed to feel safe.

“They’ve set up a camp for girls and childbearing women at the old mill site in Bonner. They’re calling it a “Feminist Re-education Camp” or some stupid shit like that. The women all wear these virginal white dresses, easy to spot against the dark trees if they break out, and, I think, to make them all look alike, like they’re only there for one reason. The suitcase just happened to be handy, but there was no mistaking what it meant—she knew she was being taken away, and that she’d soon be wearing white. Like someone’s fucking bride.”

I covered my mouth with my hand at the horror of it, for Gretta and all the other women who must be living unimaginable lives. No hope of freedom. And if they were white, and beautiful, like Gretta, no purpose other than to bear children, who would then be taken away from them. It was the stuff of science fiction come to life in the worst possible way, in my lifetime.

It did not seem possible. Even as bad as things had become before I left the city, it did not seem possible. “Do you know this, really know, for sure?” I asked.

Jacob nodded his shaggy head. “Yes. I staked it out. I watched the guards parading those women around outside, allowing them some daylight and fresh air. And I saw her. At least she didn’t look pregnant—it hasn’t been that long. Maybe she’s still being “re-educated,” he finished, in disgust.

He paused, “And I left a message for her, too—I had to let her know I’m coming for her. She knows I’m watching. She’ll be ready. Gretta’s a smart girl.”

“How?” I asked, knowing that it would be dangerous to let himself be seen, or heard. Jacob wasn’t known for subtle.

“I’ve had this all planned out, worked out nearly every detail. But the one thing I hadn’t worked out was how to let her know I was coming for her. Then, on my walk up here, which took me a couple of hard days, I found a road-killed fox, and I took its tail.

The fox is my totem animal—Gretta knows that. I tied that fox tail to a tree just outside the fence where those girls walk every day. For a couple of days, I watched from the forest. I saw her walking. I saw the fox tail fluttering in the wind, saw it catching her eye. She glanced at it, then back in front of her. But I saw her nod her head, just once.

She’ll be on board, as much as she can be when someone’s watching her every minute of the day. I took the fox tail down, but I’ll hang it up again, the day before we come to get her. She’ll know. She’ll be ready. But I need your help.”

“What do you think I can do?”

“I’ll need you to distract the guard. If it’s the one I’m thinking of, he’s a young guy, no much older than Gretta. Just catch his eye. I’ll have the fence rigged so we can get her out quickly.”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Well. I’ve not got so much to lose these days. Not like those girls. If you think I can help in getting Gretta back, I’ll do it.”

“I’d be so grateful. You know I would.”

I said nothing more, but nodded, knowing that Jacob would do anything to get his daughter back. Knowing that he’d find a decent way to thank me.

Jacob stayed out by the fire, stoking it up to last the night through—which was alright since I now knew that the identity of my intruder.

I slept soundly. Jacob has always had an old-fashioned sensibility, something I’ve admired. And, unless he had a bottle of some Montana high-test in his small pack, I felt that I could trust him. Sleep came, but, miraculously, no nightmares, for either of us.

In the morning, over oatmeal with dried berries, and more tea, he laid out the details of his plan. It was pretty simple, really, workable. We'd wait for the right weather—dry ground with a storm to follow. Not too late in the season, when we might leave tracks in the snow. Late September was the perfect time to begin planning for such an occurrence.

We waited, just a few more weeks.

On an auspicious day in mid-October, we set up a cold camp in the forest near the old mill site. Jacob had already flagged the tree. When night fell, he crept up to the fence post closest to the tree. He clipped the wire all the way to the ground, but held the edges together with easy-to-cut zip ties. We were as ready as we could be. And Jacob said that Gretta would think of something when the time came, that she'd play it just right.

The sun rose on a misty day. Weather was moving in—we could both feel it. We waited. Suddenly, a bell rang. Shortly after, the women in white began shuffling out for their morning walk, like ponderous snowflakes, some moving more slowly than others. We waited, just at the edge of the trees. There were only two guards, one at the front, one at the end. The line came around, spread out a bit, which was a good thing.

The lead guard disappeared around the corner of the building. We waited. Then I saw her. Gretta—the last in line, with the young guard behind her. As she drew close to the stack of wooden pallets, she stopped, reached a hand out for support. She turned, said something to the guard, and he drew closer to her. She gestured to a patch of weeds, close to the fence, clutched her stomach. With a sudden movement, Gretta doubled over and we heard the sound of retching. The guard turned away, out of politeness or disgust. Then, no more waiting.

I stepped up into the guard's line of vision. I flipped back my hood, giving him a glimpse of my long hair. I wore Gretta's white skirt, which Jacob brought with him in his pack, held together with safety pins at the back.

“Shoot me. Go ahead, shoot me,” I hissed.

The guard startled, and stared. Jacob slipped silently up to the fence, ran his sharp knife through the zip-ties. Gretta must have seen Jacob in her peripheral vision. She continued her charade, edging closer to the fence. And then, Jacob was in, with his knife to the guard's throat. Only seconds had passed. Gretta was out, then the guard, then Jacob. He handed me the zip-ties to repair the fence. And then we all moved quietly up the mountain in the rain and the snow. Free at last.