

Last Biker on the Hiker Only Trail

Dara heard the men coming up the trail behind her before she saw them, the tires and gears of their mountain bikes grinding and spinning against the dirt. As they grunted up the steep ramp of the last switchback, she retreated off the trail and felt a searing flash of shame for it. This part of the route to the top of the mountain overlooking the city was supposed to be Hiker Only.

Dara looked at her watch. She had a few more minutes before the peaceful sunset she hiked so hard to see bathed the skyscrapers on the plains in vivid orange and evening blue. Those same striking colors blared from the football cap on the first biker's head, as he pedaled past her on his way to the level top of the viewing area. The friend who pulled up behind him in cargo shorts and US flag tee shirt also wore no helmet. The straggling biker below them on the trail was the only one out of breath.

Dara knew she should slip off into the trees immediately, but she had already yielded once and did not want to do so again. She lifted her face, looked straight ahead, and walked past the waiting men without comment. Near her boot heels, one of them spat a thick wad of phlegm and shouted to his lagging buddy, "C'mon, Evan, you stupid pansy. It's going to be dark soon."

Dara glanced over her shoulder at the last biker struggling to round the final switchback below the lookout. Panting hard, the young man gave up and stopped to rest his head on the handle bars. When he raised his pale face, he gasped, "Fuck you, bitches."

"You're the bent-over pussy, douche. Later."

Dara heard the bikers grinding their gears and tires again, but this time, she did not step off the narrow path that led away from the viewing area and down the opposite side of the mountain. Neither man had called out the polite warning "on your left" as he neared, so why should she move? When the bikers sped up next to her, she fought not to jump as both sets of handle bars brushed the arm of her jacket.

The acrid stink of testosterone filled her nostrils, and she placed her hand on the concealed gun at her hip. Hot words sat ready on her tongue, but she knew if she spoke them, a killing would follow. Her tongue was mostly scar tissue anyway. She had not spoken her mind in years.

Dara walked over to the edge of the viewing area and saw the city lights glowing in the distance. The sun had set in the mountains behind her leaving parts of the trail in twilight shadow. She reached for her gun as the last biker grunted by in an angry wake of rock and dirt. She raised the cold metal of the gun and aimed its barrel at the man's skull, but his bobbing head was gone around the bend before she could switch off the safety.

She glanced at the trailhead parking lot below; it was empty of all but four cars. The two other men had arrived and were loading their bikes into SUVs. Dara inhaled, and wrapping her finger around the trigger, closed her eyes and prayed. Just a warning shot? Just one? To let them know.

Headlights swept across the car lot and the two men drove off, leaving their buddy somewhere on the mountain. Dara lowered the gun and watched their taillights glowing red at the crossroads and then over the highway. She tapped the gun against her thigh in time to her racing pulse, until it finally slowed, and she could holster the gun with a steady hand.

At that moment, the last biker on the Hiker Only trail sped too fast into a hairpin turn and an explosive crash echoed up the mountain in a sickening tumble of snapping metal and bone. Dara's hand shot toward the gun; she was sure the weapon had fired, but the gun sat as cold in her holster as it always had. She held her breath, and total silence fell like a shroud over her ears. Then faintly, muted cries for help floated up the mountain. Dara dared to stand still for one, two, three minutes, until the fear shaking her legs drove her down the mountainside.

Quick calculations came in a random jumble. His friends were gone and would not return. There was no one else on the trail. Only her car and his car sat in the parking lot. She had a cell phone and a first aid kit in her backpack. She had a scarf to cover her face. He might be unconscious. Evening

shadow obscured most of the pathway. Her boots were as silent on the ground as the feet of a bobcat on the prowl.

The wheel of the upturned mountain bike sat slowly spinning, as Dara approached the broken man lying in a twisted embrace of flesh and metal. Even in the darkness, she could see blood pooling beneath his fractured femur, which stuck up through the flesh of his leg like a tree shattered on a forest battlefield. The biker's eyes were closed, but he groaned through his unconsciousness. Dara hunched her shoulders around her chest and forced herself not to stop.

I was going for help - she prepared to say - fighting every cell in her body that screamed, *Slow down!* Rocks were everywhere; she might twist an ankle. She needed to move quietly in case she met anyone out for a stroll in the rising moonlight. She had to be ready to slip off the path in an instant. Dara could not see the parking lot from the low point on the mountain, but when she reached the lot's unlit tarmac, no other cars were there but hers and the dying man's on the hill.

She brought her car to a careful halt at every stop sign, and at the last red light, made a mental note to read the Monday morning paper, something she had not done in years. Later in the week, the report finally appeared. But it wasn't the crash that had killed the last biker on the Hiker Only trail.

"Bobcat got him," said the sheriff. "Drawn by all the blood."