

BATTLE FOR CEDAR CREEK
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Prologue

Global warming had for years been a bone of contention between the governments of the poorer, so called, third world countries, and the richer first world. How ironic then, that the USA, Canada, and Great Britain were among the first to be devastated by the giant wave that engulfed the Atlantic countries after the earthquake that destroyed the Canary islands and the counter surge that dislodged the vast destabilized plateau of ice off the edge of the arctic circle. The water rushed up rivers and over low lying land, devouring beaches, cities, towns, farms, and the people in them, finally withdrawing, taking with it life as we knew it.

The vast ice flow, moving south, began to melt and cool the ocean, disrupting currents. Countries, once green and verdant, were now uninhabitable, except by the extremely hardy; others were gone altogether. Since 'The Melt' the rule of law was gone. Surviving governments and emergency services saw the writing on the wall. 'Every man for himself' was an understatement.

As far as modern man was concerned, the planet was broken, and wouldn't be repaired for a very long time.

CHAPTER ONE

Fifteen years later.

Jenny sat easy in the saddle as Fergus, her horse, picked his way along the path. She was, as usual, singing to herself.

Reining Fergus in as they crested the rise she looked down on the farmstead. Usually so tidy, it was looking a bit disheveled after the high winds of the night before. The old farmhouse, smoke curling from the chimney, with its covered veranda and faded green paint, faced a long low barn across a courtyard. Scrub covered ground fell steeply away behind the barn to the tree lined stream beyond. Behind the house there was a low hill with the, nowadays obligatory, vegetable garden and hen house. Off to the left between trees that had been planted for coppicing was a cord of wood drying for next winter's fires. The sun sparkled off the solar panels on the roof making her blink. It was a beautiful scene and she would have liked to enjoy it longer, but as she was already late she clicked Fergus into motion and they rode on down the hill.

She smiled as she rode into the yard. As she had expected, April was already up and tending to her precious horses. Although tall, April was big boned, and appeared quite stocky. Constantly outside or riding, she had a year round tan and lots of freckles. Her hair was bleached blond by the sun. She could not be called pretty, but had beautiful moments, and men seemed to find her extremely attractive. What people first noticed about her was her energy. She was happiest when doing something.

"Hi," Jenny called out to April as they trotted into the yard. "Sorry I'm late, I had the devil of a job getting down the trail after the storm last night. There are a couple of trees down and a lot of debris on the path. We'll have some firewood from it all I guess: only good thing about a tree coming down."

"That's okay," replied April, smiling up at Jenny, sitting so straight in her saddle, even after a grueling ride. "I thought as much. We'll need to get some help from your dad to bring in the big stuff. He'll be able to tell us all the names of the downed trees, and how they can be used to build a teepee or something."

"He told me once he was never again going to be in the terrifying position we were in after leaving the city, that's why the bush craft mania," said Jenny. "You could drop him in the middle of nowhere and he would survive now, and having been around him obsessing all these years I probably could too."

April laughed, "I hope you never have to."

"So do I, believe me," she said as she dismounted. She patted Fergus' neck and gathered up his reigns. "Lift that bail, tote that saddle..." Jenny began singing as she led Fergus into the meadow. As there had been yesterday, and as there would be tomorrow, there was a long day's work to do before nightfall.

Jenny and her father, Mel, had moved from the city out into the country, during the time when things had begun to fall apart: the time of the shortages, as they had been known in those years just after the earthquake and subsequent flood. As the planetary climate changed it had become 'the meltdown' and finally just 'the melt'. Immediately the financial systems had collapsed, and as resources became exhausted essential services had begun to fail. The health system reached a point of critical mass and imploded overnight. The country's institutions had crumbled and the elite had done a vanishing act, taking whatever resources they could with them. Cities became overrun with gangs, law and order being replaced by the law of the jungle. Even the outer suburbs, where gardens could have been cultivated and adaptation possible, had become untenable. In the cities you were either predator or prey, and gentle Mel had decided that the country was their only hope.

With their carefully hoarded reserve of priceless gasoline and their most useful belongings packed into their old Chevy they had set off for a destination unknown.

Before they had gone ten miles they had lost everything, including the last remnants of their naivety, taken from them at a roadblock at the city limits. They had been allowed to keep their lives and the clothes on their backs. The vehicle, and everything in it, was 'commandeered' by a city militia, who, of course, did not want people leaving the city. If all the honest citizens left who would pay their tributes? Mel and Jenny had been turned back into town on foot and told to go home. They had doubled back after dark and snuck out of town.

It had been a nightmare journey. They had walked for weeks before finally clearing the no-go zone of ghost towns and

deserted farms that constant raiding parties had created around the city. They had foraged through the overgrown gardens of derelict farms, scouring the hedges along the streams and rivers for anything that looked edible, coming close to starvation. At last they began encountering people again. Long distance travel had become a faintly remembered luxury, but they were now able to beg the occasional short ride on a farmer's pickup or horse-cart.

After almost six weeks on the road they had stumbled, gaunt, and hallucinating from a bout of mushroom poisoning, into April's yard, and had been here ever since. April had asked them to choose a piece of land and they built a cozy, if somewhat rustic, little house. They lived with her until it was finished, while she taught them how to work the farm.

While he had never quite overcome his reluctance to kill animals, Mel, to his own surprise, had turned out to be a crack shot and a naturally stealthy hunter. His forays into the mountains above the farm, where he would often disappear for days, usually brought home welcome meat.

April knew how grateful they were to her for taking them in, but in truth she knew it was she who had benefited most with the arrival of these two kindred spirits. Her father had died shortly before Jenny and Mel had arrived and she had been so lonely and depressed. She sometimes thought that their coming had saved her sanity.

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They got through a lot of work in the yard that morning and were pleasantly tired and unpleasantly dirty when Mel rode in on the road from town.

Jenny heard the horse and looked up. "Hi dad, did you manage to get the horseshoes?"

He lifted a sack from the pommel. "Success," he said grinning.

"We're just about to take a lunch break," called April. "Why don't you rest Sorrel and join us?"

"I'd like that," said Mel dismounting.

"Had any more visits from sheriff Barlow?" Jenny asked around a mouthful ten minutes later.

April pulled a face. She had been having unwanted visits from the local sheriff, a good-looking man, in a slightly overfed smooth baby-faced way. He had been one of the jocks in his school days, and as a consequence had become accustomed to having his way. He did not take kindly to anything or anyone who opposed him.

"Not since I saw him off the last time. Creep! Why does he think, just because I'm a woman, alone, he can come demanding sexual favors? If I hadn't been so angry I would have been really scared. To tell you the truth, I am a little scared. He went pale around the mouth and his ears went red he was so angry. It's the only time I've ever been so close to cold fury. He was all stiff as he walked away." She shuddered, "And they say a *woman* scorned. Ha!"

"I wonder if he's tried similar stuff on other single women around the place?" asked Jenny. "He's never bothered me in that way. He has made the odd squaw comments of course, maybe his disparagement of anything other than white as white has saved me, or am I just ugly?"

April laughed, sobering up she added, "I wish I had a Cherokee great grand mother to keep him off my back. Now it would be different if it was John Cleary who came calling, I might not be so quick to turn him down."

"Oh, yes! Me too," agreed Jenny vehemently. She looked over at Mel who was frowning. "Oh come on dad, it's just girl talk."

Mel stopped chewing. "It's not that," he said. "It's Barlow, he's a bully, a bully with power, and no one to answer to. This is a time when ruthless men can have their way. We saw it in the city, and on our journey here. Who is there to curb men like him? I don't want you girls to be complacent around him."

"If I let things like that stop me from getting on with my life... well I don't want to even think about that," said April, getting up to clear away the dishes.

"You know he has never even come up the trail to our place," said Jenny. "I wonder if he even knows where it is. God I hope he doesn't, it would make me feel safer. Pity he knows the way here. I really worry about you being alone."

Mel was still looking pensive when he rode off up the trail.

They worked solidly through the afternoon, and when it was time for Jenny to go April saddled up her favorite horse, a dark brown bay with three white 'socks' named Tripod, and rode out part of the way with her. They rode on in companionable silence, working their way around the occasional windfall, until April said she would head home the long way to give Tripod a bit of exercise.

As Tripod picked his way along the storm strewn path April's mind wandered, thinking how lucky she was that Jenny and Mel had stumbled into her yard that grey day all those years before. She was so lucky to have them and all her friends in town. The Barlows of this world were rare enough around Cedar Creek. Thank heavens.

At home in his stall April gave Tripod a brisk rubdown. "Well, Tripod that's you all nice and shiny and fed, now it's my turn, goodnight boy, sleep well."

As she walked across the yard April noticed lights coming up her road. There must be at least three cars, she thought. A shiver ran up her spine as she watched the bouncing lights approach. When did you see one car anymore, never mind three?

She was standing, frozen in the middle of the yard, when the cars, lights blazing, skidded to a stop around her. Doors opened and what seemed like a river of men poured out. The manner of their arrival triggered April's flight response and she turned and ran, but before she had gone fifteen paces she was grabbed and held by a huge tattooed arm, attached to a huge tattooed, seemingly neckless, man.

"Hello, now why do you want to run away? We've come especially to see you," he growled hotly into her ear.

"What do you want?" gasped April, twisting painfully in his grasp.

"Is this the one?" asked Tattoos of someone in the shadows behind the blazing lights.

Sheriff Stan Barlow sauntered into the light. "It sure is. Into the barn boys, and let the games begin."

Tattoos started dragging a struggling April towards the barn. Some of the men headed over towards the house as others

followed the sheriff and Tattoos.

“Okay Stan, where do you want the cunt? We feel it's only right that you get first go, as you introduced us, don't we boys?” said Tattoos, grinning around at his men.

“What does it matter,” a scrawny lank-haired man said, “we're going to be on top so we'll be comfortable no matter?”

The men standing around drinking seemed to find this last remark hilarious.

“Stan please, help me!” begged April.

“Shut up, you stuck up frigid bitch,” sneered the sheriff, unbuckling his belt. “Hold her down boys, and let's get this show on the road.”

April screamed, struggling in vain against the four men pinning her down. Stan gripped the front of her shirt tearing it open. He leered down at her breasts, then taking out a knife he cut her trousers down each leg, ripping them off in turn. Blood oozed from the cuts made on her legs. Leaning in close, his rancid breath filling her nostrils, Stan looked into her eyes and smiled, then, pulling back, he slapped her hard across the face.

April gasped, eyes watering from the blow. The sheriff slapped her again breaking her nose. She screamed. One of the men leaned over and stuffed a filthy bandanna in her mouth. Stan pulled it out again saying, “We don't need that, there's no one to hear her,” then he bent over and whispered in her ear, “also I want kisses and a blow job.” As he thrust himself into her he tried to kiss her. April bit into his tongue and he pulled away cursing, spitting blood and saliva into her face. Grabbing a handful of her hair he yanked hard. “So that's how you want it?” he snarled. He found the grubby bandana and stuffed it back into her mouth. April struggled for breath; the combination of bandanna and her broken nose forced her to concentrate on breathing. Barlow's climax and pulling himself free went by in a blur of terror and near suffocation, until he called out to the watching laughing crowd, “Your turn guys, who's next?”

“I am,” announced Tattoos, his fly already undone he strutted over. As he got on top of her April groaned under the massive weight of the man. Struggling to get out from under him, thrashing her legs and arms, she caught him a blow on the side of his face. “You fucking stop that!” he shouted, pushing his forearm down on her throat. The bandanna and broken nose were forgotten in this new and much more urgent struggle for breath. Finally, mercifully, she lost consciousness.

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Returning to agonized awareness, cold and, thankfully, alone in a corner of the barn, the realization dawned on April that the high-pitched squealing ringing in her ears wasn't coming from her. She was lying silent and naked. Slowly she raised her head off the floor to see what the noise was.

The horses in their stalls around her were whinnying and pawing the ground in fear. ‘What the hell was going on with the horses?’ April fought through the haze of pain and shock into full thinking wakefulness.

Her body was in agony. Rolling onto her stomach she forced herself to her knees. Unable to walk, she crawled until she could peep around the edge of the stall. At least a dozen of the bastards were standing in a circle yelling and stamping their feet. They had Tripod in the middle, like a schoolyard brawl. One man rode Tripod while the others were throwing bottles and jeering. One of them had a whip and was flicking at Tripod's hindquarters, to get him to perform, she assumed, like a bucking bronco.

The man on Tripod was digging his heels into the poor beast. Tripod squealed in fear, eyes rolling. She realized with horror that the man had tied what looked like knives onto his boots as makeshift spurs. Jesus Christ! What could she do to stop this? Tripod was bleeding and hysterical, and by now so was April.

Panicked by her own rising hysteria a sudden coldness came over her. ‘Pull yourself together girl, you can do nothing. Stay quiet and keep calm, you can only help him if you are alive to do so,’ April admonished herself, ‘I have to pretend to be unconscious if anyone comes to look, and back where they threw me.’ Crawling back, lying down and doing nothing while she endured the frantic terror of her horse was the hardest thing April had ever had to do.

After what seemed an age men began leaving in twos and threes and the commotion started to die down. No one came to check on her, April lay still and tried to be patient. From the number of bottles lying around she could see that they must have been drinking a lot. While playing possum she assessed her injuries. No bones broken apart from her swollen nose. The stinging knife cuts on her legs seemed superficial and had stopped bleeding already, starting to crust over. She was going to get on her feet and walk when the time came, no matter how painful.

The last few remaining men started leaving. “What are we going to do with the bitch?” Asked the scrawny lank-haired man who, because of his inordinately big feet, was called Boots.

“Leave her, we're going to want more fun later,” came the reply, and they trooped out, laughing and jostling one another, closing the barn doors as they left. The last thing April heard was Tattoos telling one of his men to drive the Chevy up against the doors to keep her in.

She wondered who they were. Strange that they were still able to get gas. She supposed the cars must be modified. ‘Distraction therapy,’ she thought, ‘think of anything but what has just happened.’ She waited a while longer in the silence, then crept out from behind the stall, heart pounding.

‘For heaven's sake calm down,’ she scolded herself, ‘you're only going to survive if you start using your brain. Fear and self pity aren't an option.’ Still on all fours, she made her way over to the terrified whinnying sounds of her horse.

By the feeble light of the hurricane lamp she edged up to Tripod, cooing his name softly. She lurched unsteadily to her feet. Pain shot through her. Fighting to stand upright, she leaned against the stall, breathing deeply until the nausea subsided and she felt more able to walk. Lifting the lamp down she brought it over to have a closer look at the horse.

Tripod was very skittish, but calmed down as she gently took his bridle and ran her hand down his body. She let out a hissing breath at the injuries, but also a prayer of thanks. It was not as bad as her imagination had envisaged. Tripod was very cut about but the wounds were not deep. He would be scarred but would heal, if only she could get him somewhere safe to start the healing process.

"First, patch you up enough to get you out of the barn and away," she crooned to him. "Second, find something to wear."

Her clothes were in shreds. Thank God, they had left her with her boots on. She got one of the horse blankets and, plucking the barn knife from its post, cut a hole for her head and pulled that on, tying it at the waist with a length of rope. She tied another one on as a skirt.

'Okay, what to do now?' It was unthinkable to leave any of the horses behind, but five horses make a lot of noise. She gathered up horse blankets and all the rags she kept in a box for rubbing down and started to tie some around Tripod's hooves with the carefully hoarded twine from hay bales. She systematically worked her way through the horses, tying rags around their hooves. Her next priority was food. The oats were easy; the little she had of it was in bags, which she tied together and threw over one of the horses. Feverishly, she started to stuff anything she could conceivably think she might need into saddle bags, these she put over the other horses. Tripod would be having a hard enough time getting about as it was.

Pain and fear had April breathing very hard by this time. Her wounds were bleeding again and she felt there was something very wrong inside. She shakily sat down putting her head between her knees. The nausea was awful, delayed shock she guessed. She breathed deeply to subdue the nausea while she tried to gather her thoughts. The horses were sorted and she had all she could take. The rest just had to be left.

She obviously was not going to get very far in the state she was in so, first stop... a doctor. She would try to get to Grace's.

Gathering up the bridles of two of the horses April led them around the barn to see how quietly they walked. 'Not too bad,' she thought, 'okay time to go.' She tied the five of them in a string with Tripod in the lead. He was the one most likely to spook. Putting her ear to the barn door she listened intently, she couldn't hear anything. 'Okay! Time to take the plunge, and before daybreak.'

April pulled the chocks at the base of the false section of wall. She knotted a rope and pushed the knot through a keyhole shaped knothole near the bottom of one of the boards. A wave of nausea washed over her as she straightened. A few deep breaths steadied her and she passed the other end of the rope around a post. She pulled. The wall-door gave a loud squeak, but didn't move. April winced, cursing at the noise. This wasn't going to work. The walls must have warped over the years. She needed more leverage. Removing Archimedes from the string, she backed him over to the post, then took a turn of rope over the pommel of his saddle and encouraged him to pull. With a scrape the door began to open and she gave silent thanks that her father's post-melt paranoia had had him building escape hatches and hidey-holes around the farm.

When the opening was wide enough she wound the perpetual flashlight to get it to light up and led the string of horses out. She pushed through a tangle of thorny scrub growing up against the back wall of the barn trying to keep the disruption to a minimum. When she had the horses through she tied them to a tree branch and returned to fetch Archimedes and close the opening. She took the knotted rope out of the hole and threaded it through on the outside, then, looping it over Archimedes' pommel, she eased him along until the door was fully closed again.

Murmuring soothingly to the horses April lead them away from her home. The night was cold and the horses' breath hung in the air, April was shivering and sweating all at once, and nausea washed over her again. She breathed deeply, the cool clean air reviving her.

"Okay fellers, lets get to Grace's, and get us all some help," she whispered.

CHAPTER TWO

The rags wrapped around the horses' hooves had worked. It took them an hour of quiet plodding to reach Jack and Doctor Grace Taylor's house on the outskirts of town.

Grace had finished her medical training and had taken over her elderly father's practice when the *catastrophe* hit. The availability of antibiotics and other drugs had dried up, except for the privileged few. Grace's father had always been interested in Homeopathy and Herbal medications, so of necessity they had researched these alternatives. Homeopathy was the perfect solution to the problem of shortages, as the remedies went a long way and lasted indefinitely if stored correctly, and herbs could be found all over the countryside. By the time her father died Grace was an accomplished medicine woman.

Grace's house was in darkness. April felt a chill run up her spine. Why, she did not know. It was two in the morning. 'What did she expect?' She led the horses to the back of the house and knocked gently on the kitchen door, no answer. 'Of course there'd be no answer at this hour, what was the matter with her?' She got a grip on herself, tying the horses to the ring beside the door. She tried the handle and the door opened, the hairs stood up on her arms.

April leaned her head through the opening but immediately pulled back with a gasp. A terrible mix of smells assailed her: excrement, and a strange cloying smell. She flicked on the flashlight. She hadn't used it much on the trip to Grace's, not needing it, sacrificing speed rather than risk being seen. Shielding the light with her hand she shone the torch into the kitchen, it was in a mess, dishes and jars strewn about, but no Grace or Jack. April was shaking with dread as she crept through the mess to the slightly ajar sitting room door. Gagging at the increasingly dreadful smell she slid through the opening and shone the light around the room. The horror was absolute, and April was violently sick.

Jack was tied to a chair, his front drenched in congealing blood, his throat obviously cut. He had been beaten violently before his death. Grace was lying on the floor in the middle of the room. April pulled the curtains and risked lighting a table lamp. In the dim light she checked that Grace was alive. Unconscious, and obviously raped and beaten, she was still breathing. April fetched blankets and wrapped them around her. Then she sat back on her haunches and wondered what to do next. What she yearned to do was kill. There was a frightening red mist in front of her eyes. "Stay calm April, you've come too far to blow it now," she hissed at herself.

She was hunched over looking at Grace, desperately trying to will her mind and body to do something, when Grace's

eyes flickered open. Whimpering Grace pulled herself into a fetal position.

“Grace, It’s okay, it’s me, April, there’s no one else here now, only me, we’re alone, they’ve gone.” April kept repeating that they were alone and that the men had gone. She knew that it would be what she would want to know.

“Oh God why! Jack! Jack! Where’s Jack? They were beating him. Oh God! Oh God!” Grace tried to get up, but her head spun and she lay back, calling feebly, “Jack... Jack.”

“Grace, you have to keep your voice low.” It was a small mercy, but Grace must have been unconscious before Jack was murdered. She was about to receive yet another shock, but at least she had been spared witnessing the act. “Grace! I’m serious, you have to keep your voice low, you’re going to have to be very strong, Grace look at me, Look at me Grace! Do you understand?”

Grace focused on April. She nodded her head.

“We’re not going to survive this unless the doctor in you kicks in. Please Grace, I can’t do this alone anymore.” April’s eyes brimmed.

April’s distress seemed to help to pull Grace out of herself, and she nodded again.

April nodded in turn. “Jack is dead Grace, he’s over there on the chair,” she said very gently. “I haven’t had time to do anything, to cover him or anything, I’m sorry.”

“Help me up, I want to see, I may still be able to do something,” said Grace, pulling herself to her knees. She groaned and nearly passed out. With April’s help she crawled over to Jack. She took his wrist, feeling for a pulse, nothing. Lowering her head into his lap, she lay there stroking his lifeless hand.

After a long while she slowly raised her head and looked at April with eyes like fathomless pools, then the state April was in slowly filtered through her grief, and she asked, “You too?”

April nodded.

“Are the police on the way?” she asked.

April snorted, “It was the police.”

April told her about the Sheriff.

Still stroking Jack’s hand Grace replied, “I don’t think we can trust any of them then. It seems we’re on our own. Okay lets get some clothes on, then we’ll decide what to do.”

They went through to the bedroom. “I have to shower, April. I won’t be long, and while you shower I’ll pack my medical bag. I’ll have to dress those wounds when we get a chance, meanwhile we can both take some rescue remedy, and an aconite.” She got the two bottles of homeopathic pills from a cabinet and gave them each one.

They had pulled all the curtains and were doing everything in the semi dark. Having showered Grace came out and got dressed in layers of warm clothes.

April stepped into the still running shower. The water was still warm from the day’s sun on the solar panels on the roof. The cuts and scrapes protested, but what heaven. She wanted to scrub every inch of herself with wire wool. She felt she would never get the smell of them off her, but she only allowed herself a couple of minutes, then she was out and gently dabbing herself dry. Larger than Grace, April had to dress in Jack’s clothes.

“I’m ready,” she said as she came into Grace’s surgery. “I’ve cleared up the bloody swabs, I threw them into the range, and I buried the towels deep in the dirty washing basket. I want to leave as little sign of us being here as possible.”

Grace was packing medical supplies into a backpack. She handed another pack to April saying, “Fill it with whatever you think we’re going to need most.”

April started by getting a few sweaters and some of what were obviously Jack’s long johns, and then went to the kitchen to pack food. She was just finishing up when Grace came through.

“They’ve taken the booze we kept for barter. It’s gone, so is my jewelry.”

“Where we’re headed we won’t need jewelry, but we are going to need food, and you don’t have very much left, they’ve nearly cleaned you out of that too.”

“I suppose the bastards have taken all my precious coffee too?”

“Afraid so,” said April, “I think we’d better leave, we’ve been here long enough.”

Grace nodded, then gestured for April to wait as she went through to the living-room, she stood there looking at Jack. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I don’t want to leave you, but I must... I love you.”

April had taken the packs and was strapping them onto the horses as Grace came out. “Oh,” she gasped, “I didn’t realize you had the horses, although it’s you so I should have guessed.”

“Well at least we won’t have to carry the packs,” April whispered, “but we are going to have to walk. Just follow me, and let’s stay as quiet as possible.”

Grace gripped the strap of one of the saddlebags, terrified she might get separated in the dark, and they set off. April, leading Tripod, headed back towards her farm, but a little way along the track they branched off to the left, a short while later they crossed the road and were back onto a barely discernible track. A sickle moon had risen and they made their way by its pale silvery light.

It was a hellish hike for Grace, unable to see properly, not knowing where they were, she was terrified she’d get separated from April, gripping the saddlebag strap till her hand and arm ached. She kept stumbling, and except for her death grip on the horse would have fallen numerous times.

April stopped the horses and came back to Grace saying, “His name is Oscar, you may as well be on first name terms as he seems to be your lifeline. Oscar this is Grace, keep her safe.”

Grace gave a small smile and stroked Oscar’s nose, “I find it strange that I want to keep alive and am gripping Oscar so tightly, I want so badly to be with Jack right now, and not here.”

“If it wasn’t for the horses I don’t know if I would be making the effort either,” said April, “but I seem to have had this

mantra going through my head ever since I saw Tripod being tortured: Survive!” They were silent for a while. “We’re not too far from where we’re going, so chin up, maybe another half an hour. I’m taking the long way, and doubling back a bit to throw off anyone who may want to track us later.”

It seemed strange to Grace in the days to come that she hadn’t been curious as to where they were going on the ‘trip from hell’ as she thought of it. The shock she supposed.

The sky was starting to lighten as April, Grace and the five horses approached the long, low log house that was built into the mountain so that the roof was part of the grassy hill. Attached to the house was a low L-shaped barn with horseboxes, making a courtyard. There was a winter-dreary vegetable garden on the southern slope, and split logs stacked along the walls. Mel reasoned that the wood was good as insulation as well as fuel.

“Look! There’s smoke coming from the chimney, thank God! Somebody’s up,” gasped a relieved April.

The door opened, and a flashlight shone in their faces.

“April!” a surprised male voice exclaimed.

“Oh Mel, Thank heaven,” said April “Help us please.”

“Jenny come out here, I need your help,” shouted Mel, as he came over to the two stricken women and the horses.

Grace had sunk to the ground and was sitting there with a vacant look in her eyes.

Jenny came out of the house wrapping her coat around her. “What’s the matter?” she asked, coming to a stop when she saw the horses and April, then Grace, who was obviously in shock and utterly exhausted.

Jenny ran to her. “Come into the house, come now,” she cooed gently to Grace, helping her to rise. She turned to April. “Come on, dad will see to the horses.”

April started to argue, but Mel butted in saying, “The horses have been okay this far, but you two aren’t. Go in, get some food and drink, and then we’ll talk, meanwhile I’ll get them under cover, go.” He looked at Jenny and she nodded.

Jenny led Grace into the cabin and April followed.

Pulling two easy chairs closer to the range Jenny sat the two women down and stoked the fire to warm the room.

The warmth reviving her, April said, “Poor Grace, I’m fit and used to being physical, but the trip was hell for her. She was amazing, not one complaint.”

Jenny had been getting the kettle on and putting bacon and sausages into a large pan. Shocked at the bruises on their faces, and the blood seeping through April’s trousers, she was full of questions.

She gave them both a full glass of water, advising them to sip slowly, while she set the table. Mel walked in as she was breaking eggs into the pan.

“The horses are fine,” he said, leaning his rifle against the wall, “but Tripod is going to need attention, although it’s not as bad as I thought at first, superficial, but we don’t want infection setting in.”

“Calendula,” a small voice said from the depths of one of the chairs. “I have a lot of it in my medical kit. I make it myself, it’s a wonderful little orange daisy, and will do wonders for all of us. We should both take some arnica as well, before we sleep.”

“I’m so pleased you’re back with us, do you feel up to coming to the table and eating something?” asked Jenny.

“You better believe I’m coming to the table, and eating too, if we’re going to get through this I need to pull my weight, and we are going to get through this!” Grace said with a slightly wild look. She pushed herself out of the chair and hobbled over to the table.

They all sat down while Jenny served the food. April thought she would gag if she had to eat, but Grace’s words made her try. After forcing down the first few mouths full she started wolfing it down. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was.

Jenny was clearing away the dishes and the calm domesticity of the moment helped April relax enough to give them a broad outline of what had happened.

“I didn’t know where else to go. I went to Grace’s first to get help with our injuries, not realizing then that they had been there first. After finding her and Jack, I’m assuming they’ve taken over the whole town. It’s only surmise really, but I couldn’t take a chance, so we headed up here.”

“Of course you did, it’s only sensible,” said Jenny.

“I noticed the rag-bound hooves on the horses, very clever, an old Indian trick,” said Mel, impressed.

“Okay, first we’re going to get you two cleaned up, and then we will get the horses sorted. Then we’ll have a powwow,” Jenny said with a wan smile.

She showed them to the bathroom and a room with a bunk bed in it, giving them a towel each en route. Mel had brought their backpacks in from the barn and they had the medical kit.

Grace and April got on with the ordeal of cleaning and dressing wounds. Grace remarked that, as the trip had not caused them to hemorrhage, chances were they were going to be okay. Physically anyway.

While April and Grace were dealing with their wounds Jenny and Mel started to see what to do about poor Tripod. Mel was running his hands over Tripod’s flanks as Jenny held his halter and made soothing noises. The horse’s skin quivered as Mel probed one particularly bad spot. They had a dish of warm water with some of Grace’s calendula in it and Mel was cleaning the cuts with this, then dabbing on an ointment made with the same plant.

“No tears, dad, neither of them cried. After all they’ve been through, they didn’t cry when they told us what happened, not even when they told us about Jack,” Jenny said, pain darkening her eyes.

“Mmm, remember how we were when we made the trip from Denver, and all we went through? We got to a point where we had to split from our feelings or go under. I reckon April and Grace are at that point, only with them it’s had to happen in a matter of hours.” Tripod whinnied and shied away as Mel washed out another bad cut. Jenny stroked his velvety nose, making more soothing noises.

“Let’s hope they get the opportunity to feel again soon, but I have a feeling we are in for some difficult times. We’re going

to have to make some arrangements.”

“You heard April say that the Sheriff was one of them, and you know what a blue bummed bastard he is. So he got his revenge on April.”

Mel looked at his daughter. “You would have had trouble from him too, except he looks at people like us as beneath him, thank heaven, because it gives us time to make plans. His mind may only turn to us after he has thought of everything else, and he doesn't know how to get here, but he will find us at some stage and we must be ready.” Mel said this last with steel in his voice.

“What about Deputy Cleary? John has always seemed a decent man,” said Jenny hopefully.

“I don't think we can take the risk, until we've got more information,” her father said.

Having tended to the last, less serious scratches, and checked and blanketed all the horses, they packed up and went into the house. They found April and Grace fast asleep on the bunk beds.

“Best thing for them at the moment,” said Mel. “Let's do our chores while they sleep, so we can get down to some serious planning when they wake up.”

CHAPTER THREE

Quinsy Carver, aka Germ, aka Tattoos, turned over and rolled off the couch where, after first kicking off two of his compatriots the night before, he had fallen asleep. Landing with a thump that woke him up he rubbed his head groaning, then spat on the floor.

Few people knew his name was Quinsy, and if any of those people had dared to call him by the name they would have regretted it, as did the children who'd teased him at school. As no doubt his parents did: his father once accusing his mother of causing Germ to be the delinquent he was because she had insisted 'to give him a bit of class' on calling him Quinsy. What it did was give him as much class as a wolverine at the dinner table. His parents were now dead. “Nothing to do with me,” was Germ's answer to the police when he was questioned about the house fire that had killed them both and paid Germ out a big insurance.

He kicked the boot of a thin balding man with a graying rat's tail ponytail who was lying on the carpet, mouth open, softly snoring. “Get some coffee on and find me some breakfast, Craig,” Germ croaked.

Craig sat up rubbing his eyes and tried to swallow. Fuck, his mouth felt like a platoon had used it for a welcome mat. “Why can't we get the bitch to do it?”

“Good idea, go get her, but first get the coffee on, and find me something to fucking drink,” Germ growled as he kicked some bottles around trying to find one with some liquid still left inside it.

Craig scuttled off, pretending to look through the bottles. If he did find one with anything in it, it was his, he was sure of that.

Getting the coffee onto the stove, he had to light a God dammed fire first. Boy did he miss the good old days were you could just plug things in, but he had to admit that coffee was a lot better when it was cooked. Germ always made sure to have coffee, which since the melt had become a form of revenue, along with tobacco, sugar, alcohol, gasoline and antibiotics.

When the coffee was ready he brought a cup through to Germ, sugared and stirred. He'd had his own in the kitchen first, knowing that he would not get any otherwise.

“I've sent Boots out to get the woman,” Germ said as he poured a dollop of whiskey from a bottle he had found into his coffee.

Craig looked longingly at the bottle as Germ put it down on the floor beside his chair. “Well, go and get on with breakfast,” snapped Germ.

Craig stalked off, muttering. There was an assortment of hairy, foul smelling men drinking coffee in the kitchen, all feeling very unwell, although they were on their feet and moving with surprising speed when the commotion erupted in the lounge.

Boots was at the door yelling, “She's gone, the horses too!”

“She can't be gone, we had her locked up tight,” Germ said. Then he asked in a low growl, “Who took the Chevy away from the door?”

The men looked at each other with shrugs and shakes of the head.

“The pickup was right where Craig put it last night. I had to back it away from the doors to get in. When I did there was no one there, no girl, no horses, nothing,” Boots said, wide-eyed. “I'm telling you she has to be a witch, because we checked that barn last night for another entrance and there was no way out but the door, and we blocked that.”

“There's no such thing as witches, you idiot,” Germ said. “Well, get off your asses, go search the barn. I want her found.”

“Hey, the Jeep has gone,” said one of the men as they went over to the barn.

Craig turned back to the house to tell Germ but Germ was standing in the doorway with his coffee and had seen for himself.

“That bastard Stan took the jeep and her, that's how she got out. Oh well, looks like Craig gets out of making breakfast. We'll go into town and have some there, with Stan.”

A couple of the men were left grumbling at the farm while the rest headed for town. Germ was asking questions about the search: “Did any of you idiots check if there were loose boards?”

“There would have to be a lot of loose boards to allow a horse through, hard to miss,” said Dave, a slim dark man with a noticeable, in this crowd, lack of tattoos.

Feeling inadequate, because he didn't know if the remark was meant to be sarcastic or not, Germ lashed back at Dave, asking with menace, “Where were you when we did the woman? Don't think I didn't notice your absence.”

“I was in the house with Strings. He was playing me one of his new tunes, so we missed all the action,” Dave said, with feigned regret. He and Strings had deliberately been in the house, to be away from the 'action'.

Germ gave him a thoughtful look, but was diverted by their arrival on the outskirts of town. "Go to the Sheriff's office," he ordered.

They drove up to the Sheriff's office and piled out. Germ and Craig went in, slamming the screen door behind them, to find themselves confronted by a chest high counter with Deputy John Cleary behind it.

Looking up at the clatter of the door John's first thought was, 'I didn't know they'd found the missing link.' "Can I help you?" he asked politely. Behind the counter, John moved his hand down to the gun at his waist.

"I want Stan," Germ said curtly, then shouted, "Hey, Stan!"

"That's okay, John," said the Sheriff coming through a doorway behind him. "Come on through, Mr. Carver." He lifted a section of the counter to let Germ through.

"No, we want some breakfast. You can show us the best spot to have it in this dung heap town."

"Okay. Hold the fort John," the Sheriff said as he came out from behind the counter. He ushered Germ and Craig out onto the sidewalk.

'What the Hell!' thought John as he watched them leave.

"Heck Germ, why did you come to my office?" Stan hissed.

"Why did you leave without telling us? Taking the Jeep, and with the girl, we wanted her to cook us breakfast, and for other things." Germ's wolfish smile did not reach his eyes.

"I had to get to work. Did you want me to wake you up before noon to give me a ride...? What do you mean the girl, are you saying she's gone? How could you let that happen? She could have the town up in arms if she gets back here."

"We didn't let her go, that's what I've just been telling you."

Stan thought for a moment, then said, "I know where she'll be, at Dr. Taylor's, getting fixed up, lets go."

Piling into the cars again they headed out to the Taylor's house. When they got there some of the men went around to the back door to block any retreat. Germ and Stan pushed through the splintered front door into the house.

"From the look of the door someone's been here already," the Sheriff said. He was sniffing the air with an awakening in his senses that something was wrong. Opening the door into the lounge he saw Jack tied to the chair, dead. "Jesus, what the hell happened here?" He walked slowly up to the body holding his breath. There were flies swarming around the gash in Jack's throat.

Germ let out a loud laugh, shouting for the other men to come and have a look. "Hey guys, looks like Tom and the gang have arrived. You can always tell Tom's handy-work," he said to Stan. There was general hilarity at the remark.

The Sheriff spun around and looked at Germ. "You mean there are more of you?"

"Why sure, Tom and the gang. Tom's my deputy, you think you're the only one can have a deputy?" They had drifted back outside to get away from the smell. Germ was grinning, there was something about it that made Stan shudder.

Turning away from that grin, he said, "We had better look for the Doc. She and, maybe, April must be here somewhere... and where are this Tom and 'The Gang'? They seem to have evaporated."

"They'll be at the nearest bar of course, when we're done here you can show us where that is," Germ said, pushing Stan aside and going back in to search the house.

"I found signs, someone had a shower, blood on a couple of towels. She must have gone into town to get help. We'd better get back there," Stan said coming out of the bathroom.

"Okay guys, back to town, let's find Tom and have some breakfast," called Germ.

'Fucking hell,' thought Stan, 'what in God's name have I got myself into?'

They had to park away from the bar as there were bikes parked against the curb outside, their metal, waspish bodies glittering in the sun.

They found their riders in the bar. They also found a terrified landlord and his son who were bringing in plates of food and filling up glasses. The landlord looked relieved as the Sheriff came in, but he started back in alarm when he saw Germ and the others following hot on his heels.

"Tom!" roared Germ. A tattooed grizzly bear of a man lurched out of his chair and gave Germ a slap on the shoulder that would have felled a rhino.

"You old bastard, where have you been? We've been so bored waiting for you we had to go out and entertain ourselves," Tom leered.

"Yes, I saw. Lovely job. You haven't lost your touch."

As Germ and Tom were slapping each other's backs the publican came up to the Sheriff with a questioning look.

"How long have they been here Pat?" Stan asked him.

"They banged on the door at one thirty or so this morning, I told them to push off, but they just broke the lock, and made us serve them. They passed out about four, sleeping all over the bar and the house. That Tom fellow kicked me out of my own bed, not that I was able to sleep with the terror. I've been trying to get Brendan to slip out, but the boy won't leave me."

"He's a good lad," the Sheriff said absentmindedly. He was thinking about April and where she could be. He had been racking his brains since they'd left Grace Taylor's house.

"What are you going to do about them, Sheriff?" Pat asked quietly.

The Sheriff put his hand on Pat's shoulder, looked him in the eyes and said, "Not a goddamned thing."

A smile spread over the sheriff's face. He had just realized where April was. Up at that Indian's place in the woods. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He walked over to Germ and Tom's table. Germ introduced him.

"Stan here is the S.O.B that organized this shindig, Tom," explained Germ.

"Great party Stan, you should do it for a living." Tom threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Germ," said the sheriff, ignoring Tom, "I know where the bitch from the farm is."

"Oh forget her Stan, we can get more from the town, one cunt is very like another in the dark, eh Tom," Germ laughed,

poking Tom in the ribs with his index finger.

"It was you who said the men thought she was a witch, and that you wanted to know how she and five horses got out the barn. The guys have been muttering about it all morning. We need to find her."

Tom looked puzzled, so Germ explained.

"She got out of a solid barn you say. You sure you didn't let her out Stan?" Tom asked slyly.

The Sheriff looked at Tom. "Do you think I'd be looking for her if I had?"

Dave, who had been at an adjacent table eating, leaned back and asked, "You talking about the 'witch'? You should see it Tom. Barn's solid. We searched it, and she's gone. She and five horses, poof." He made an explosive gesture with his fingers, "gone!"

Stan looked at Germ, "Well? You so sure we should leave it now?"

"All right, all right, let me have some food first," and turning to the room full of men he shouted, "eat up, we're going to get your 'witch' and show you just how human she is." Turning back to Tom and the Sheriff, Germ said, "Tom you and your guys stay here and get started on the town. Stan, me and the boys can sort this out."

"The trail up to the Indian's Place is back beyond April's farm, so we need to head back there. I also want to have a look at this 'solid' barn."

When they got back to April's farm Stan had a quick look through the barn. After he was through he said irritably to Germ, "We need to get on, it's going to be dark in a couple of hours, it's a short day when you get up after noon." He too had failed to find April's escape hatch.

Germ called the rest of the men together. Stan explained they were going to go get the woman, April, and they were going to have to go on foot, as they could not get there by car, not even with a 4X4. There was general consternation and some low muttering.

Stan knew vaguely in which direction Jenny and Mel lived, as he had seen Jenny arrive one day when he had come calling on April. "Start looking for a trail over in that direction," he said, pointing.

They hadn't been searching long when there was a yell from a huge bald man with a giant beer belly and piercings all down his one ear and across the opposite eyebrow. Everyone came over to look. It was obviously the start of a path; there were even hoof marks. "Well done, Smalls," said Germ. "Okay guys, we'll need to track them by the hoof prints, so keep your eyes sharp."

After collecting flashlights, extra jackets, and filling some bottles with water, it was decided that Stan, Germ, Smalls and three others would follow the prints. They reckoned six of them was plenty to get a couple of women and a middle aged man. The rest were only too pleased to go back to the farm, they would have been even more pleased to get back to town, but such was life.

Following the trail left by Jenny that morning was not an easy task. The path was littered with debris from the storm. As they picked their way along, one of the men observed to his friend that, 'they were following only one set of hoof prints. Where were the other four?'

They had been tracking for some time and were having difficulty finding the spoor in the deepening gloom. There was muttering about turning back, but Stan insisted they carry on. "It can't be too far now. Can't you smell it? Smoke!" he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

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