

## PARADISE LOST

by Kathleen Caprario-Ulrich

I'm a girl from Jersey. I know my way around a shopping mall and prefer the great outdoors, inside and on a small screen. Sure, I was a Girl Scout—I went on a camping trip in fifth grade and learned how to braid a lanyard. But what'd I know about surviving in those great outdoors? Turns out, more than expected.

My first, and last, time hiking in backcountry, I was lost by noon. It started out as a perfect mid-August morning. Your Garden of Eden—pre-snake and apple, of course—hand-tinted postcard type of day. Shafts of pure sunlight shone through the old growth forest and sparkled on Paradise Lake, the pristine and spring-fed pool just downwind of Goat Mountain's summit in the Idaho wilderness.

My boyfriend and I had hiked up four thousand feet from base camp on the mountain's other side and spent the night. He was a part owner in the patch of backcountry land we were staying on and I trusted him. We packed light. No extra anything. It was a straightforward “up, down, going ‘round the mountain’” sort of thing.

On our descent, and despite his assurances, something in my gut told me things were not okay. Like flies swarming outside a mountainside cave. Like a black bear's paw print the size of my entire hand with individual hairs and moisture still bubbling in its mud-cast mark.

He said, “It's old print... The cave's abandoned... *Stop imagining things.*”

That made no sense to this Jersey girl who took the motto, “Be Prepared,” to a whole new level and always carried an extra twenty in an outside pocket to toss at junkies and muggers while she ran the other way. But I wasn't in Jersey and I still needed to believe. In him.

Our official Forest Service map showed a shortcut and he said we'd be back on the river in no time. We emptied our water bottles and veered off into the woods. Eight hours later, with no food or water, we looked out from a bare ridge in the middle of nowhere. I said, "We're lost." He said, "We're delayed."

I couldn't believe our good fortune when we found a bush with the largest, most delicious looking huckleberries imagined and gorged on their plump sweetness, then bedded down for the night on a small patch of rocky soil. We'd be back to base camp by noon. The next day.

In the middle of the night, we woke, violently ill—five alarm fire ill. We had no water for three days and no food for five. Dying wasn't my first or any choice. However, the thought that made my blood run cold was that we'd be eaten by animals and our scattered bones found the next summer by another hapless couple. But, just maybe, we'd survive to tell the tale over a sixteen-ounce ribeye at the local watering hole, the Moyie Springs Saloon and Steak House.

Time wasn't on our side, and I watched my now-weakened guy struggle to cobble together a "HELP" sign made from fallen branches that he'd striped with a small hatchet to expose the bright wood underneath. Maybe the fire watch plane that we could hear in the distance would fly over, see it, and rescue us.

But, like Sisyphus pushing the same damn rock up the same damn hill, he was getting nowhere fast. Albeit, totally invested.

Right then, that decades-dormant Girl Scout within me awoke. I could—I would—save us. As this thought took root, it traveled deep to the core of my being and a fierce primeval self, emerged and her name was Survival. Screw the sign. Screw the fire plane. And screw those mother fucking Bears.

“We’re outta here!” I knew a losing hand when I saw one. He’d wanted to stay. He’d invested too much time on the sign, betting on someone else saving us and being right. But in that moment, taken aback by my sudden and out of character demeanor, he complied. Down we went, breaking trail. We tumbled over, under deadfall and eventually landed next to the creek, it’s babbling voice signaling life.

Our clothes hung off our emaciated bodies as we entered the smoke-filled, one room Moyie Springs Saloon and Steak House for that ribeye we’d promised ourselves. A two-sheets-to-the-wind old timer overheard us telling the bartender our tale and in a boozy voice called out, “The berries...it was the berries!” Turns out, the huckleberry bushes on *that* side of the mountain had their own survival plan that included grafting their roots with the poisonous-when-eaten-raw elderberry plant. Guess who didn’t get the memo.

I still remember when we got to the road and realized we were safe. I felt that fierce self subside deep within my core as quickly as she’d emerged. However, it’s good to know she’s there when I need her and life gives me the opportunity to remember exactly who knows best.

Me.

THE END.