

Without A Trace

by Gita M. Smith

Christine and her brood came down from the mountains in fall, exchanging their high plains meadow cabin for a flat in town with a view of a warehouse wall.

Has to be done, she told Roy at the hardware store, because ya can't risk getting snowed in all the way up there, eh, even with chains on the winter tires.

The kids were happier, anyway, she smiled, not having to ride the morning school bus down the pass when it's still dark as pitch.

She bought insulating gaskets for her storm windows and then, impulsively, added a wall clock that sounded cheerful bird calls on the hour.

While Roy watched Chris cross the street, her back straight and her stride long, he couldn't help wondering why her husband had disappeared, those years back.

No one wanted to believe ill of Chris, who was, after all, salt of the earth, but the man did just vanish right after one of her kids was rushed to the hospital with broken ribs.

Christine was adjusting to life in town again, and she knew what should and should not be done. She should join the book club. That way lay companionship and conversation, which were vital. She should not go into bars alone. The men looked at her and thought, *there's a woman who's been up in the mountains without a man. She must be hungry.*

"Stupid men," Christine thought, "who don't know the difference between hungry and lonely."

Christine needed to get back up the mountain one last time before the snows came, to load up the horses and bring them down to town. She'd arranged to board them over winter for, if she left them behind at the cabin, they'd go off who knows where in search of food and shelter.

She chose a school day to go, expecting to be back before the kids came home, and she packed a lunch and some apples for the mares before hitching the trailer to her Ford-250.

As she drove, she thought back to the times when Charlie and she had been happy, or happy enough, and the cabin beside the high plains meadow had resounded with music and lively conversation.

There, she had seen her first elk calf, her first golden eagle, Mackenzie Valley wolf, and first starry night undimmed by light pollution.

There, too, she had first tasted the back of a hand in anger, the sting of a horsewhip, bone-deep fear and, finally, an unthinkable act of self defense.

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After greeting her mares with apples and kind words, Christine sifted through her house to be sure she'd taken everything valuable or private. A deserted mountain cabin in winter was a favorite destination of trappers and romantic teenagers, she well knew.

In her second desk drawer, she found a hospital bill, long since paid, for Zack's emergency room visit four years earlier. The memory of that night rose up like hot acid, and she saw the small broken body and imploring eyes of her son as his father threw him against walls and furniture, again and again.

Stuffing the piece of paper in her pocket, Christine stumbled out of the cabin and herded the horses into the trailer while a bitter, sick feeling overwhelmed her. How much longer until time, or present events, erased that nightmare vision from her past?

A light breeze stirred the aspens, and from somewhere nearby came the call of an olive-sided flycatcher. Christine remembered teaching Zack and Lolly, then five and four, to recognize the quirky cheeping: *quick three beers, quick THREE beers.*

They had walked the meadow many times with Charlie on those days before his bouts of rage nearly took their lives. But all too soon, the children had learned to fear him as well as they had learned the names of the meadow flowers and grasses.

Christine sat for a few minutes in a patch of fragrant sage, calming herself before she had to get behind the wheel. She knew one thing for certain: Charlie's "disappearance" had simply been a coward's flight from the law, born out of fear of arrest, and she would never tell it otherwise.

Christine had grown up in a farm family that placed no romantic filters over reality, a family that imparted an unblinking view of survival priorities.

"Women and children firsst," she hissed, steering the pickup and trailer slowly through hairpins, down the mountain pass. To her left, coolly assessing the scent of the two trailered mares, were four coyotes plump with a summer's worth of rabbits, and more.

"Good dogs, very good dogs," murmured Christine as they shrank in her rearview mirror. "They clean their plates and chew the bones like mother's little helpers."

Down to town she drove, thinking ahead to autumn jackets for Zack and Lolly, thinking ahead to the time, not so very far off, when she'd file the official papers and be free of a man who'd just disappeared one night without a trace.

Zack and Lolly were old enough to remember when their father went away, but not old enough to sort out the confused events of that night.

In a foggy sort of way, Zack recalled his mother taking him from the cabin in soft blankets, Lolly crying between them on the ride to town. He recalled that she had left him in the hospital that night and gone home.

When she came back the next morning, she'd said, "Papa is so very sad and sorry that he hurt you. He agreed to go far away and never come back, so that he won't ever hurt me or you or anyone again."

Lolly remembered that night differently, but all she had were disassembled images of her Papa lunging and yelling, of her Mama endlessly chopping something in the yard and then throwing the

pieces far down the hill while the moon traded places with the racing clouds.

