

Finding Hope

By George Mercer

Carefully placing each footstep in the deep moss, John slowly made his way towards the base of the large pine tree, his eyes riveted on the mound of fur that gently rose and fell in step with his every breath. Perched in the dead top of an adjacent veteran fir, a large raven surveyed his progress. Occasionally calling to its peers, the harsh caws merged with a cacophony of gurgles and squawks that tumbled through the branches.

Streaks of sunlight were only now making their way through the forest canopy, a welcome reprieve from the darkness that hid the subtleties of their task, the nuances of movement that could spell the difference. Hopefully the slivers of early morning light had been enough when Dave had

taken the shot, aiming for the neck or front shoulder, but truthfully, just hoping to make a clean hit.

Getting closer, John strained to see where the dart had hit as he readied the small aluminum pole to prod the bear. Although partially hidden by the wide trunk of the tree, he thought he could see the dart protruding from the animal's hindquarter and took this as a sign that the barbed point was embedded in the thick coat.

Turning back to Dave, he gave a thumb's up before reaching out with both hands and easing the pole into the bear's left shoulder. Getting no response he pushed a little harder, rocking the bear slightly as he strained against the weight.

The next seconds were a blur as five hundred pounds of raw fury instinctively catapulted itself towards John. Charging around the base of the

tree before anyone could react, the grizzly brought up within inches of its objective as the heavy cable securing the leghold snare snapped to attention.

Bowled over by the outburst, John dropped the pole as he fell backwards into a patch of buffaloberry, looking past his feet into the frothing mouth and glazed eyes as the grizzly collected its wits and wobbled to its feet. Rising on two legs, the bear lunged forward again, testing the strength of the cable clamps, which relinquished slightly to the tremendous force.

Rising again as John rolled over and tried to scramble to safety, the grizzly's third lunge was stopped short as a shotgun blast reverberated through the valley, sending an explosion of ravens skyward.

Pulling himself through the tangle of underbrush John staggered to his feet and

surveyed the scene behind him as Dave made his way toward the bear.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” said John, shaking with the adrenaline rush pulsing through his veins.

“It was him or you,” said Dave, reaching down and picking up the twisted metal clamp that had finally succumbed to the grizzly’s feat of strength. “You could say thanks.”

“Fuck,” said John, slowly regaining his composure. “I hate this.”

“Do you think I like it?” said Dave, prodding the bear with the barrel of the gun.

“No, I know you don’t,” said John. “Sorry to give you a hard time.”

“Apology accepted,” said Dave.

“It’s just that there’s got to be a better way,” said John, brushing the dirt from his pants and running a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know. In the meantime, I’ll get the chopper here so we can sling this bad boy to the pit.”

“Why don’t we just leave him,” said John. “Let Nature take care of him.”

“You know we can’t do that John. He’ll just attract other bears and the next thing you know we’ll have someone else running into trouble.”

“But this is a closed area,” said John. “No one is supposed to be in here anyway.”

“Right,” said Dave. “And we both know how well that works.”

“Yah, well it would work better if management had some balls and would let us

charge some of these yahoos who think they can fucking hike and bike everywhere they want to.”

“Save it,” said Dave, as he keyed the mike strapped to his radio chest harness and called Dispatch. “You’re preaching to the converted. Besides, your daughter will want the vet to necropsy this guy to see if he was in good condition or not.

“Well, we know it won’t be tough to figure out the cause of death,” said John.

“Yah, lead poisoning,” said Dave, shaking his head. “I get it.”

John bit his lip as Dave relayed the information over the radio.

“Yah, Trav,” Dave said to the dispatcher. “Can you get in touch with ‘YPZ’ and tell Paul we have a bruin to sling out from behind the lake. He’ll need

a long-line and we'll direct him in when he's airborne."

"Ten-four," came the response. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Ten-four," said Dave.

As the bear rose slowly through the canopy, John and Dave gave the pilot the 'All Clear' and made their way silently back to the pickup, carrying what was left of the clamps and cable used to anchor the snare to the tree.

The snare had cut so deeply into the grizzly's ankle that the two men decided to leave it for the vet to deal with. They had seen enough gore for one day.

Pulling into the pit a few minutes later, they were met by a young woman who briefly acknowledged their arrival before turning her attention back to the dead bear lying on the orange plastic tarp.

A young man in dark blue coveralls knelt over the carcass as he carefully ran a razor sharp skinning knife up the bear's belly. Stopping at the rib cage, he looked up briefly and nodded to the new arrivals.

"Good morning John. Dave. Looks like he was shot at close range."

"You might say that," said Dave.

"Too close, if you ask me," said John.

"What happened, exactly?" said the young woman.

"He wasn't quite under when we approached him Megan. I thought I made a better hit but

obviously he never got the full effect of the drug. And as a result, your dad just about met his maker.”

Megan stared at John, who just shrugged his shoulders.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Well, I have some laundry to do but other than that, I’m here aren’t I?”

“Yes, you certainly are,” said Megan, returning her attention to the necropsy. “What do you think Mark?”

“Everything seems fine,” said the vet as he methodically probed the bear’s belly with his gloved hands. “Lots of body fat for this time of year and the belly’s full.”

“Any idea why he might have charged that biker?” said Megan.

“Probably why any bear would,” said John. “A surprise encounter and the bear just reacted.”

“Most likely,” said Mark.

“I now know what a bear looks like when he wants to kill someone,” said John. “I expect if this bear really wanted to, we’d be skinning that biker out now instead of this guy.”

“You really have it in for those kids, don’t you?” said Dave.

“Not kids,” said John. “Most of the people biking back there are as old as us. Well, maybe as old as you. I haven’t seen any really old farts like me on the cameras.”

“But do you think we have the right bear?” said Mark.

“I think so,” said Megan. “The last time we downloaded the camera data there was a large boar showing up regularly on the trail. The only

other grizzly we've seen up there has been a young sow and cubs."

"Still, it could have been another male," said Mark.

"I don't think so," said Megan, pointing to a large split in the grizzly's left ear. "I noticed this gash on a few of the close-ups. Probably from an old ear tag that got ripped out."

"So this bear has been handled before," said Dave.

"At least once," said Megan.

"And now one time too many," said John.

"Well hopefully we can save the sow and her cubs from a similar fate," said Megan.

"Hope," said Dave. "That would be a good name for her."

"Better than Fate," said John. "Which is what I think this guy's name was."

“How do you put up with him Megan?” said Dave, shaking his head at John.

“No comment,” said Megan. “We usually just agree to disagree.”

“Hey, we’re on the same side,” said John. “I’m just tired of necropsying bears that should still be eating buffaloberries without having to worry about looking over their shoulders for the next bozo to come barreling at them on a mountain bike.”

“We all are Dad. But some of us choose to try to work within the system.”

“Fair enough. But you’re young,” said John. “You’ll learn. Anyway, no point flogging a dead horse. I’ve seen enough for one day and I do need to do that laundry. Why don’t you drop me off at home Dave?”

“Take the truck,” said Dave, handing the keys to John. “I’ll help Megan and Mark clean up here and pick the truck up later. You owe me a beer tonight anyway.”

“Just one?” said John. “Is that all my life is worth to you?”

“Well, maybe two,” said Dave with a wink. “Maybe.”

It was late when Megan finally strolled into the house and found her father asleep on the couch. Pulling a comforter over him she quietly made her way to the kitchen and began to prepare supper, running to the vegetable garden to pull greens, which she washed and spun before mixing them with roasted nuts and homemade dressing.

Pulling chicken breasts from the refrigerator and slicing them into a pan of sizzling olive oil and garlic, she didn't notice her father standing in the doorway until she turned away from the stove.

"You remind me so much of your mother," he said. "A model of efficiency in the kitchen."

"Thanks," she said as she slid by him to pull plates and utensils from the cupboard. "Why don't you go back and lay down while I get things ready."

"I'm up now, I might as well stay up. Do you want a glass of wine?"

"Sure," she said, wondering if this might be the lead in to another 'father-daughter' talk."

"Red?"

"Sure."

"I'm sorry about the sarcasm, today."

“No worries,” said Megan. “You had a tough day.”

“I’m looking forward to pulling the pin.”

“Well, it’ll happen fast enough. Three more days and you are a free man.”

“And I couldn’t be more proud of you. The third generation of Haffcut’s to work in the outfit. Your mother would be so proud. And your granddad.”

“He wouldn’t be turning over in his grave?” she smiled.

“Maybe a little, but then your Mom would have given him the first spin. Women, doing a man’s work. I could hear him now.”

“I thought you had similar feelings, at first, when you and Mom first hooked up.”

“Well not exactly.”

“No? How was it different?”

“I knew she could do the job. Hell she could do it better than most men. Better than me, that’s for sure. I just didn’t like the notion of her dealing with some of the shitrats we had to deal with back then. It was dangerous.”

“And it isn’t now?”

“No, it still is, but now recruits are better trained. They’re professionals. Back then we flew by the seat of our pants. There was a lot of shithouse luck involved.”

“Sounds like there’s still some of that according to Dave’s story from this morning.”

John rolled his shoulders and hung his head.

“True enough. Dave saved my ass. But if it wasn’t me, it would have been someone else. Maybe you.”

“I’m sure my turn will come.”

“If we don’t start changing the way we handle people, I expect it will.”

“Is this the sermon again?”

“Call it what you like Megan, but if you think there is any chance for that little sow grizzly behind the lake, what’d Dave call her again?”

“Hope.”

“Yah, Hope. Good one. If you think there is *any hope* for Hope, something is going to have to change on the ground or the next thing you know she’ll be caught in a snare and looking down the barrel of a pump action shotgun.”

“And what are you proposing we change?” she asked, knowing full well what her father was driving at.

“First we have to stop trying to manage bears and manage the only thing we can,” said John.

“People,” said Megan, rolling her eyes and turning back to her work.

“Right,” said John, ready to start his tirade.

Sensing Megan’s reluctance to listen to him berate “the system” yet again John let it go and didn’t say anything further.

Noting the silence Megan turned to face her father.

“Let me see what shows up on the cameras. The area’s been re-posted with ‘Closure’ signs. Our communications folks are getting the word out. And the Superintendent has been briefed.”

“That useless ...”

“Don’t,” she said, holding up a hand. “I don’t want to hear it. Let me see if I pick up any people on the remote cameras. If I do I’ll pass on the photos to the law enforcement guys and they can deal with it. If the sow is still in the area with her

cubs then there will be a stronger case to proceed with charges.”

“Well if that happens it will be a first,” said John. “And I’ll leave it at that. Let’s eat.”

“Agreed. I’m starving.”

John sat in the middle of several piles of paper and folders, effortlessly thumbing through each file before tossing them into the blue plastic recycle bins placed on either side of his chair. A single framed photo of Megan and her mother sat on the wooden desk. A tattered “Wall of Shame” banner was pinned to a corkboard above, covered with dozens of photographs of John at various stages in his career.

“Sorting out your life?” said a voice behind him.

John turned around as his boss pulled up a chair and sat down.

“Kind of,” said John, avoiding eye contact with Ben.

“Two bins. Keepers and junk?”

“Nope. No keepers. One bin just won’t take all this shit.”

Ben chuckled as he peered over John’s shoulder at ‘The Wall’.

“You haven’t changed one bit since I met you thirty years ago John.”

“Nope. Still that objective, by the book, fun-loving guy I always was.”

“Well, two out of three isn’t bad.”

“Objective and by the book?”

“Nope.”

“By the book and fun-loving.”

“Nope”

“But that only leaves ...”

“Yup.”

“I guess you’re right,” said John. “By the book just seemed too ...”

“You don’t have to say it,” said Ben. “I know the drill.”

“But hey,” said John. “No offence meant to you. I know you always had my back, even though there was that period of exile to the frozen gulag.”

“Who are you kidding?” said Ben, finally noticing the teary eyes but making no comment. “You loved the north. You could be as crazy as you wanted to be and no one was the wiser.”

“I did kind of fit in there,” said John, smiling sheepishly.

“And I brought you back, just like you wanted. You got to finish off with your daughter picking up right where you left off. How many parents can say that?”

“Not many. And I appreciate it. You were a man of your word.”

“She’s going to be a chip off the old block,” said Ben.

“Minus some of the rough edges,” said John.

“We can only hope,” said Ben, patting John on the shoulder and getting up to head for the door.

“We can only hope.”

They both laughed.

As Ben disappeared into the hallway, Dave’s head popped around the corner.

“Just about ready?” he said.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” said John, picking up the remaining files and splitting them into the two

bins before sliding the framed picture into his pack.

“Come on in gang,” said Dave as he entered the office followed by a large group of John’s coworkers and close friends. At the rear of the line, Megan walked in carefully balancing a large cake, its top ablaze with candles surrounding an icing covered grizzly bear charging through the top of the cake.”

“Nice touch,” said John as he helped Megan place the cake on a table in the corner of the office and gave her a hug.

“Happy retirement, Dad,” she said, kissing him on the cheek to the roaring approval of the others, as Ben walked back in and joined the crowd.

“Happy retirement, John,” they repeated.

Ben pulled a paper from his shirt pocket and stepped forward.

“Well John,” he started. “I just have a few words but first I wanted to pass on best wishes from the superintendent, and, wait for this, the Prime Minister himself.”

“Great,” said John, not hiding any hint of sarcasm.

“Okay, I was lying about that last guy, but seriously, the superintendent does pass on his best wishes for a speedy departure, I mean a healthy retirement,” Ben said with a chuckle.

“You’re on a roll,” said John as several others in the crowd added their two cents worth before Dave brought the room to order and continued with the send off.

“So John,” said Dave. “We’ve been through a lot together, most recently being the near-death experience you had a few days ago. I probably know more about you than you know yourself, but

why don't you sit back and regale us with a few of your prouder moments in the outfit."

"And funniest?" someone added.

"And most embarrassing," another piped in.

John sat back down and put his feet up on the desk

"Any more requests before I begin?" he said, canvassing the faces in the room.

Just then another head appeared in the doorway.

"Come in Trav," said John. "We were just getting started."

"Sorry," said Trav. "But it might have to wait. There's been another grizzly bear incident up back of the lake. We need a few first responders."

It had taken some effort to convince John that this was a job for someone else but Megan was happy when Ben stepped in and issued what he called “his last order”. Finally John conceded and could only watch as Megan, Mark and Dave quickly gathered the details from Trav and left.

The news sucked the life out of the office but a cooler of beer that found its way in soon had those remaining sitting around the radio, listening to the play-by-play as Dispatch relayed information to the local hospital, paramedics and RCMP.

“Another bear that’s going to have to be dealt with,” said Ben as the details of the encounter that had sent another mountain biker to hospital with minor injuries were extracted from the radio conversations.

“It might be time to deal with the real problem,” said John, “and put an end to people

cutting their own trails in the last strands of bear habitat remaining in the valley. People are the problem. Not the bears.”

Many in the remaining crowd murmured their agreement.

“We’ve been down this road before,” said Ben, regarding the group. “You know as well as I do that management won’t restrict use.”

“I know that,” said John, feeling the liberating effects of a few beer. “But I’m telling you, not as an employee, but now as a member of the general public, that I’m tired of the outfit killing bears instead of kicking people’s asses.”

“Hear, hear,” said a few voices in the room.

“Calm down John,” said Ben. “This isn’t the time to get into this.”

“It’s never the time to get into this. And please don’t give me your ‘is this the hill you want to die on’ line.”

“John, for Christ’s sake, let it go.”

“Sorry Ben,” said John as he got up from his chair, grabbed his coat and pack and made for the door. “From now on I’m on the outside looking in. I’d love for you all to back me up, but either way, I’m going to do what I have to do.”

“John, for Christ’s sake, calm down and come back here,” said Ben. “It’s your last day. Don’t end it this way.”

John stopped for a moment and turned back to the crowd who were also drifting for the door.

“No,” he said. “You know I’ve always been a little ‘unorthodox’. Isn’t that the way you described it in my annual evaluations back when? But I don’t give a shit anymore. No more bears are

going to die in this valley if I have anything to do with it.”

“So was it her?” said John, setting his glass of beer down as Megan walked into the house and laid her pack on the table.

“I think so,” said Megan, hauling out her water bottle and reorganizing the pack’s contents. “The biker didn’t get a good look obviously, but he thought he saw cubs. It happened pretty fast.”

“Always does. Was he on a main trail?” John asked as he pulled another beer out of the refrigerator and poured a glass for Megan.

“No, one of the wildlife trails they’ve been cutting out and expanding up into the side hills.”

“They’re never going to learn,” he said as he handed her the glass.

“Most will,” she said as she guzzled a mouthful and wiped the foam from her lips. “I spoke to quite a few people who were up there to see what happened. Most of the local bikers were choked that this guy was in the closed area.”

“But there’s always a few.”

“That’s probably not going to change.”

“What about the bear? Did you guys set some snares? You know she’s the one that’s going to pay the price.”

“The guys did set some snares, but they promised me she wouldn’t be put down. She’s been doing all the right things, avoiding people, staying away from all the attractants in the main valley. She’s the kind of bear we want around here. She just reacted. It was a bluff charge and

she never even touched the guy. He just got scraped up pretty bad when he fell off the bike. He was lucky.”

“No, he was stupid. The little sow was lucky she never hurt him or there’d be no recourse but to put her down. What did Dave call her again? Hope?”

“Yah. She’s a beauty from the pictures I’ve got off the camera. And a good mom.”

“Well, here’s to Hope,” said John, raising his glass.

“To Hope,” said Megan, settling into a chair at the table.

“Are you heading back up there tomorrow to check the snares?”

“Yah, at first light. I want to be there if she’s caught.”

“Good plan.”

It had been a few days since the incident and Megan was tiring of the routine. But she was committed to getting up each day to check the snares with Mark who she had easily convinced to accompany her on the early morning forays to the back of the lake.

Having a vet along increased the odds that the little sow would come to the least amount of harm and would be well cared for if she had ended up in a snare. There was also a chance that the cubs would be snared and not the sow, which increased the risk that she might react aggressively to anyone approaching her twins. Mark had convinced Megan to bring the shotgun along as a

backup but promised he would only use it as a last resort.

Every morning they found the snares tripped and the bait bags ripped apart. But they found no sign of Hope and her cubs and a quick check of the remote cameras gave no indication that the little sow and her offspring were still around.

Megan wondered if they had been scared out of the area after the incident or if another boar had pushed them further afield. Worried that they might wander into trouble in town she had asked the radio dispatchers to contact her if there were any reports of the sow and cubs so they could be hazed away from any possible run-ins with people.

She had hoped to pick her dad's brain on the possible whereabouts of the three bears but the early mornings meant early to bed as well and

Megan hadn't seen John all week. When the phone rang late one evening and she tumbled out of bed to answer it, she was surprised to hear her father's voice on the other end of the line.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"In town. I just heard over the scanner that a bear and cubs were hit on the tracks. Thought you'd want to check it out."

"Shit."

There was a moment of silence as Megan collected her thoughts.

"Where have you been all week?" she finally asked. "Every time I check in on you, you're gone."

"Oh, I've been out and about."

"You haven't been up back of the lake I hope?"

The silence on the other end gave Megan her answer.

“Dad. Stay out of there. You’re retired. You don’t work for the outfit anymore.”

“No, I know. It’s a great feeling. Coming and going as I please.”

“But the area is closed to everyone. Even you.”

“So they say, but I’m finding fresh bike tracks there every day. I’m telling you no one’s going to pay attention until someone gets charged. I mean legally. Or charged again by the sow. It’s one or the other I figure.”

“Dad. Maybe you’re right but it’s not your place ...”

“Don’t lecture me Megan. If I run into a biker I’ll deal with them. And if I find a bike stashed up there ...”

“What are you going to do Dad?”

“Well, I’ve found that a pipe cutter can make quick work of a bike frame.”

“Dad. What? You’re turning into a vigilante?”

“Call it civil disobedience. It has a nicer ring to it.”

“Right Dad. Listen, I’ll go see if the bear hit on the tracks is our girl. I’ll let you know what I find out. But in the meantime, please don’t make my job any harder than it already is.”

“You mean wearing the Haffcut handle? Being related to me?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. I’m trying to make things right so bears can still find safe areas around here to do their thing. But first, we’ve got to find Hope.”

“Okay, I’ll stop wasting your time. Get going and let me know if it’s her. I’m crossing my fingers, okay.”

“Okay. I’ll see you this evening. Let’s have supper together. But promise me you’ll stay away from the lake.”

Her last request was greeted by silence and she knew her father had hung up.

Quickly dressing and grabbing her pack, Megan was soon making her way out of town towards the rail line.

“It wasn’t her, was it?” John asked, placing a plate of dinner in front of Megan as she walked into the kitchen.

“No, thankfully,” said Megan. “It was a black bear sow and cubs but they walked away. The locomotive engineer thought they hit her but it’s hard for them to tell. A guy on the highway saw it

happen. He saw the bears head for the bush and said it didn't look like the train hit them."

"That's good to hear," said John, sitting back down at the table. "Any reports of our little grizzly?"

"No. The snares have been tripped every morning but maybe there's another bear doing that. Some of them are pretty savvy."

"Yah. Even an old fox could be setting them off and taking the bait?"

"Well, they're usually ripped apart but the baits are not always gone, which is odd."

Megan thought for a moment.

"Wouldn't be a two-legged old fox would it?"

Her father lowered his head and tackled the plate of food in front of him.

"A well fed old fox?" she added, waiting for him to look up.

He had never been any good at keeping secrets from her. She had always been good at reading the signs. Even when her Mom was diagnosed with cancer and they had tried to shield her from the truth, she knew.

“Dad, let this thing run its course.”

“Megan. Hear me out, please. There are only a few possible outcomes to this. If the sow is snared and is handled she becomes a marked bear. Ever time you handle her and her cubs you’re one step closer to habituating them to people, and we both know how that turns out. If she comes back and runs into people again, same outcome, or worse. But if we keep people out of the area there’s a chance that she can pull off raising those twins and there’ll be three bears in the system that are wary of us and taking their own steps to avoid us. I’ve been saying it for years. If we manage our own

activities, the bears will take care of themselves. It's not rocket science."

Megan pondered her father's take on things.

"Come with me this evening," he added. "Try it my way for once and let's see what happens. But we have to pull those snares."

It was dusk when they pulled in to the trailhead. Quickly making their way to the site, Megan checked the cameras while John tripped the snares, disconnected them from the cable anchoring them to the tree and placed them in his pack.

"Fuck," said Megan, reviewing the camera's data on her laptop.

"What's up?" said John.

“No bears recorded, but two mountain bikers went through just after supper.”

“And you’re surprised?”

“I was hoping they’d learned their lesson.”

“How long since they went by?”

“Less than an hour ago,” said Megan, reviewing the data file.

“Let’s go,” said John. “Maybe we can catch them at the other end of the trail.”

“We don’t really need to,” said Megan. “I think I know who they are. I recognize the bikes and the clothing. I expect there will be some front on shots on the other trail camera so we can positively identify them. If it’s who I think it is they won’t be very cooperative. I’ve talked to them before and they basically gave me the cold shoulder.”

“So what do you want to do?” said John.

“Leave it with me for now. I’ll talk to the law enforcement guys and they can deal with it. I’ll push for them to lay charges. The closure signs are all up and there is no way the bikers can say they missed them. They would have ridden right past them.”

“Or you can let me deal with them,” said John, pulling the pipe cutter from his jacket pocket.

“Yah, like that’s going to help,” said Megan. “If I have to I’ll go to the Superintendent. He might listen to me.”

“Well, good luck with that one,” said John. “Better you than me.”

“Maybe he’ll listen to the voice of reason,” said Megan.

“Is that a dig?”

“Could be,” Megan said with a smirk. “But maybe it’s what I have to do to save three young

bears and one old fox from getting into more trouble.”

“Did you hear the news?” Megan asked excitedly as she walked into the house late in the evening.

“No,” said John. “I’ve been home all day minding my own business.”

“Amazing,” said Megan. “All of the stars *are* aligning.”

“Sarcasm?” said John.

“Just a touch,” said Megan. “But I digress.”

“So what’s the news?”

“Well the Superintendent went above and beyond,” said Megan. “I spoke with him after I passed on the information to the law enforcement guys. I showed him the pictures of the two

offending mountain bikers and he didn't pull any punches. He's already signed a Superintendent's Order banning them from the park. And he supported pressing charges. That'll send a message to everyone to stay out of the closed area.

"Well, I'm gob-smacked," said John. "Good for you."

"And that's not the best part," said Megan. "When I downloaded the other cameras to get the photos we'd need to positively identify the bikers, there was a series of pictures of the little sow and her cubs. They had missed running into the bikers by a few minutes."

"More than likely she heard them and took the cubs off trail to avoid them," said John.

"Which is excellent," said Megan. "But best of all, *I* ran into her when I was hiking out. She and the cubs were feeding on buffaloberry. I called out

to let her know I was there and she gave a couple of quick snorts and the cubs were gone. They were definitely her first priority. She wasn't in a hurry but she moved off the trail and kept an eye on me until I had walked past. When I looked back she had wandered off to join the cubs and was gone."

"So there is hope after all," said John. "She's figuring it out."

"10-4," said Megan, smiling. "Now I just have one old fox to train."

"That might be a tougher row to hoe," said her father.

"I have no doubt it will be," said Megan. "But I think there's hope for him as well."