

## EDGE OF THE TRAIL

One of the big differences between my friend Susanne and me was that she had no trouble voicing her feelings (any of them), especially when she was irritated. She was irritated for me, when I described the latest insult from my boss.

"What did you say when he asked you to lie for him?" she said.

"I said I'd think of something."

"But that means you'd do it!"

"I don't like doing it, but it keeps the peace."

"He shouldn't ask. It's inexcusable that you should have to lie for him, when he should never have agreed to write that book chapter on top of all the other stuff people are waiting on from that guy —"

"I know, but his reputation suffers enough already."

"Yes, and eventually YOUR reputation will suffer. Next time, just say you won't lie anymore. It's reprehensible."

"You're right," I said. "Hey, can we walk a bit? My knees hurt now."

"Oh, sure. Of course. I forgot about your arthritis."

We dismounted, walking the trail alongside our bicycles. After a moment of silence I said, "I have a plan to handle this situation."

"Let's hear it."

"I've got some brass knuckles. I'll just beat him up next time."

Susanne laughed the best laugh I had ever heard. It was a rich gurgle of genuine amusement that bubbled up from deep inside her.

"I'd pay money to see *that*," she said. "Are you okay to ride now?"

I was. We took to our bikes again and the countryside became a smooth, green blur.

It was early summer. Rhododendrons and azaleas were in gloriously full bloom beside us, and with such perfect weather, we couldn't stay indoors. Riding the River Trail, one of the many biking and pedestrian paths in our area, was an outing that we enjoyed often.

There were more pedestrians than usual on this main stretch of the trail. Some of the twists and loops in the road were also fairly narrow, making it difficult to share with people who preferred to walk rather than ride. Susanne never actually rode at someone, as if she intended to force him off the pavement, but her strong will was definitely intimidating. I pulled behind her, meekly waiting until it was safe to ride around the offending pedestrian.

Later, after we had turned off the trail, onto one of its less-traveled arteries, she remarked, "Jo, you're almost too nice."

"Are you suggesting I'm a milquetoast?"

"No," she laughed. "Just that you tend to let everybody else get ahead of you."

I steered her away from this unpromising subject. "Look, over there!"

We looked to the right, where I pointed to a large field of summer wheat. Above the crop, a small brown hawk hung motionlessly upon the air, wings at full stretch, talons extended. He dove straight down toward something moving on the ground, but came up empty-handed. After three such attempts to catch breakfast, the beautiful bird

sailed slowly away from us. Our eyes followed him until he was out of sight. This was why we didn't see the man until he stumbled onto the path in front of us, sinking to the ground in a posture that suggested significant pain.

Susanne immediately steered left of him, but she miscalculated the trail's edge, some twenty feet above the river, and tumbled head-first into the thorn-laden blackberry bushes growing thickly down the west bank. I pulled quickly to a stop, listening to her shriek expletives that would make a sailor proud.

I threw my bike on the grass. The man was young, but he did not look at me as I hurried to the edge where Susanne struggled back onto the trail. I looked over her, noting multiple scratches from the vicious barbs. She blotted at a few of them, then said shakily, "I need a cigarette. What about him?"

"I don't know yet. He's hurt, though."

"Go see if you can help. I'll be there in a minute."

Approaching a wounded stranger is not something I would normally recommend, yet I did so with little fear. His eyes remained closed as I knelt beside him.

The accident had not been trivial. He was bruised many times on his slender arms and legs; there were a few scratches similar to Susanne's, and blood trailed from a gash in his right eyebrow. Sweat stood out on his face and his teeth chattered as if he were cold. At his left side, I noticed first the badly swollen knee, then his arm hanging at an unnatural angle. My hands moved lightly over him, seeking any response, then his eyes opened.

"Hi," he whispered. His teeth still chattered and the pupils of his large, smoky blue eyes were dilated, but he seemed alert enough.

"Hi," I said. "Looks like you've had an accident."

"Run off the road. Tore up my bike..." his voice faded away.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Sam. I'm Sam."

"Is your arm broken, Sam?"

"No," he winced. "shoulder's dislocated. Can't feel my arm."

"Okay, just sit still. Can I take off your helmet, look at this cut?"

He allowed me to remove the helmet. As I did so, thick ripples of chestnut-colored hair spilled into my hands. It was slightly more than shoulder length, curling naturally, and soft. It was hair most women really had to work for.

His cut was ugly but not serious. I left him for a moment, walking back to Susanne. She was calm now, tending her own cuts.

"What's the damage?"

"He's got to have help. His left shoulder is dislocated, lots of scrapes and bruises."

She grimaced. "Have you ever set a dislocated joint?"

"No. Not even my own."

"Me, either. So, what now?"

"He wants some water."

She followed me back to Sam, squatting near us as I put my water bottle to his lips. Her silence indicated that she was thinking hard about our next step. Then she said:

“Jo, I think I should ride back and you should stay here with him.”

My eyebrows rose into my hairline.

“What else makes sense? It’s a five-mile ride and your knees already hurt. He’s in no shape to be left alone out here. If you have another idea...”

“No,” I said reluctantly. “I don’t.”

“Then I’d better get started. Take the back packs. You’ll need the water and first-aid things. Keep the food, too.” She looked sharply at me. “Are you okay with this?”

“Sure. I feel like the reincarnation of Florence Nightingale.”

“Don’t worry – didn’t you say you had brass knuckles?”

“They just melted. *Hurry.*”

She disappeared in seconds, heading for the mail trail to find a phone. I was not afraid to be alone with Sam; Susanne’s long legs and determination would carry her toward help and back to us very quickly. I knelt again beside him. He now looked at me with clearer eyes and a tiny smile.

“Your name is Florence?”

I blushed. “It’s Jo. JoLyn Bricker.”

“Sam Anthony. Thanks for stopping to help me.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Real help should be here soon.”

He shifted on the grass, and I winced empathetically.

"Look, would you feel better lying down? We could at least elevate your knee a little bit, keep it from swelling any more."

"No. That isn't the problem. Could you put my shoulder back in?"

The question revived memories as distinct and painful as if the experiences were fresh—numerous dislocations of either kneecap, so frequent that the only corrective action was surgery on each one, resulting in the arthritis I lived with today.

"We should wait for a doctor," I said guiltily. "Hey, do you hear that? It's them! That was really fast..."

"Yeah, too fast," Sam said, in a completely different voice. He grabbed my arm roughly. "We gotta get out of here. Now."

"What are you talking about? Stop, let go!"

"Jo, help me up. Now! Don't ask," he shoved me with an upward motion. Reluctantly, I stood and, when I didn't offer to help him, he practically *climbed* me. He was suddenly no longer in need of rescue, his blue eyes now blazing and the mouth I had almost considered sensitive set in a grimace of determination that frightened me.

"Grab this stuff," he ordered, indicating the supplies that Susanne had left with us. "we have to get off the trail. Do it!"

I glared at him, but the urgency in his voice compelled me to gather up the back packs. The roar of motors came closer, but was still some distance away. Sam's good arm reached out to pull me to his right side, using my body to support his. He was very tall, with a sinewy frame suggesting great strength. We stumbled down the tiny

knoll just off the trail, headed toward a grove of trees. When his knee protested this activity and he lurched sharply, I dropped both packs in order to keep him upright. He snapped at me to pick them up again, and I finally found my voice.

“No, I *won't* pick them up. What the hell is going on?”

“Jo, please keep moving,” he said, less gruffly. “We can’t stay here.”

I opened my mouth to ask why not, when he looked over his left shoulder and stiffened, causing me to look, too. I made an instinctive judgment that the three men approaching us were not nice people, which Sam confirmed.

“They’re looking for me. If they find me, I’m dead. And they won’t stop at just me, get it? Now COME ON.”

My brain reeled with questions as we limped toward the trees, then Sam muttered something about working for months, and I slowed our pace enough to gasp, “Months for what?”

“To put this thing together,” he said tersely. “We were making the deal, then a couple of riders blazed by, scared the hell out of my contact and he panicked, ran off. These three figured they’d been set up and tried to get their stuff by running me off the road. I still have their stuff because he hadn’t traded yet. They want IT, and me, and your being here won’t stop them from trying to collect.”

The reality of his words stung. *I’ve got my arms around a drug dealer; I’m helping a drug dealer; he’s a drug dealer.* Variations on this theme, tumbling endlessly through my mind, turning me to ice inside.

We reached the trees about that time, and I tossed the back packs aside. Then I dropped Sam, much the same way. He crumpled at the base of a thick evergreen, breathing hard, favoring his left arm. I stood in the shelter of the branches, watching for the three riders, convinced that Susanne would never allow something like this to happen to her.

"What are you thinking?" he asked quietly.

"Were you going to say anything about this? Did you think you'd get away from them and there'd be no need to explain, or what?"

"I didn't think they'd get here so soon. The accident was a lot further up the trail, and my bike was okay until it blew a tire, then I dumped it and started walking until you found me. I didn't expect to be rescued by two women. If I'd had a clearer head, I'd have told you both to keep moving."

"Where were you going?"

"There's a police station not far from here. Your friend's probably there by now."

"You'd have turned yourself in?" I gasped.

"Uh-uh. I'd have called someone to pick me up."

"So...where are these guys? I saw them once back there, but now I don't."

"They'll be looking around in a pretty big circle, since the police are so close. Those motorcycles aren't legal out here, they can't risk any attention."

"Then we aren't safe here."



“Not for long. Jo, I’m sorry this happened, but I need your help. There’s something I need you to do.”

“What?”

“Put my shoulder back in place.”

My doctor once told me how to set a dislocated joint. Armed with this hazy memory, I went to Sam’s left side.

“When I take your arm, lean back into the tree. Sam...”

“I know,” he barked. “Get on with it.”

I straightened his arm, taking firm holds at his wrist and elbow (“...don’t yank on it, just pull with a smooth, steady motion.”). Sam turned his face away as I drew his arm toward me. This forward motion soon resulted in a horrific popping sound, followed by a bone-grinding jerk that caused him to cry out, but the shoulder joint snapped neatly into place.

“That was awful,” I said, shuddering.

“You did great,” he smiled thinly. “It’s better, really.”

I heard motorcycles approaching just as I remembered that my bicycle was still lying beside the trail where I’d dropped it, announcing our whereabouts. Sam twisted around to see what I stared at, and he quickly realized the problem.

“Don’t bring it down here. Hide it up there, and hurry.”

The trees covered me most of the way. It was not easy to drag my bike under the nearest rhododendron bush, but I did so with due haste, managing to scrape away the tell-tale signs, tucking under a few chipped leaves and a broken bough. From where I

stood, there was no evidence that anyone had been here. Not bad for a first-time espionage trainee, I thought, even an unwilling one.

Halfway back to the grove, the motorcycles screeched to a stop behind me. I dove into a friendly evergreen tree, begging its branches to conceal my shaking limbs. The voices that filtered through were angry, semi-hysterical, but still curious. They were not yet aware of us. I waited for long minutes, afraid to breathe, praying they wouldn't search for Sam on foot. Our silence convinced them that the area was clear, and the bikers roared away. I extracted myself from the tree--not gracefully--trembling badly all the way back to Sam.

When I got there, Sam had vanished. Slight traces of him existed at the tree where I set his shoulder. He was nowhere in sight, and did not answer my tremulous calls to him. I stared at the vacant space for eternal seconds, wondering blankly where he could have gone, and why. But I was definitely alone when Susanne's voice shouted my name and the Police Rescue Unit van pulled up with flashing red lights behind her. I approached them in utter bewilderment, wondering how to explain this event without sounding completely insane, feeling strangely bereft.

Two weeks later I found an article in the newspaper about a drug ring that had finally been smashed and its motorcycle-riding members arrested. The police had stopped them on the River Trail because their motorcycles WERE illegal in that area, then a DMV trace disclosed outstanding warrants for more serious indiscretions.

Four weeks after that, I agreed to meet Susanne at the River Trail. We had not ridden there since the "incident." I arrived first, so I attached my carry-on bag and

adjusted the seat, then heard footsteps behind me. I turned to greet Susanne and met instead the blue eyes of the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. He was tall and lean, dressed in a peach Izod and navy blue shorts. His thick chestnut hair was pulled back into a ponytail, spilling over his shoulders in abundant curls. He smiled hesitantly when I recognized him.

"Hi," said Sam.

"Hi," I replied stonily.

"I've been looking for you for weeks. Thought you'd never come back out here."

"I've been busy. You look better."

"I'm fine now, thanks to you. I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate what you did —"

"It's not necessary," I said shortly, moving away from him.

He blocked my path. "Please, let me explain things."

"What happened out there?" I hissed. "They questioned me for DAYS about you! Did I know about the drug deal, did you tell me anything, did I know where you'd gone. How did they miss you when they arrested all your friends?"

"They weren't my friends. I'm a police officer."

"Yeah? I'm a lion tamer."

"That's a dangerous line of work," he grinned.

"At least I know which ones are the lions."

"I apologize. Look, I've been working undercover for months now — the police were so insistent with you because they were worried about me, that's all. If I hadn't

stumbled across you that day I'd have gone to the police with my cover intact and the case still open – but I needed your help, and you gave it so kindly, even though you thought I was one of them. It was safer to just disappear. You could honestly say you didn't know what had happened to me."

"You really are a cop? Show me a badge."

He did, and I suddenly felt light-headed with relief. It had been a sore point that I'd misinterpreted someone's character so thoroughly.

"Is your name really Sam?"

"Yes. Forgive me?"

"Well..."

"Great!" he laughed. "I couldn't ask for your number if you were still mad at me. I'd really like to call you later."

I gave him my number as Susanne joined us, curious but composed as always, then we three walked the footpath where the Trail began, eagerly splicing together each version of our tale. Finally, Sam glanced meaningfully at me then made a graceful exit.

Susanne and I mounted our bicycles and, for the first time in our riding excursions, I pulled ahead of her, keeping the lead even as we dodged pedestrians.

"You're a new person today," she said approvingly.

"Yeah. No more Ms. Milquetoast."

"It looks good on you. Now I want an experience."

"You couldn't possibly need to become stronger."

"I was thinking of a *humbling* experience."

“In that case, maybe you should aim for one of these guys weaving all over the trail.”

“Pick one out for me,” she laughed her wonderful laugh.

I might do that, someday. For now, it was enough to just enjoy this new self-confidence.