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The Wolf Road

Written by Beth Lewis

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The WOLF ROAD

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For my mum and her red pen.

THE END A' OLD ME

I sat up high, oak branch 'tween my knees, and watched the tattooed man stride about in the snow. Pictures all over his face, no skin left no more, just ink and blood. Looking for me, he was. Always looking for me. He left red drops in the white, fallen from his fish knife. Not fish blood though. Man blood. Boy blood. Lad from Tucket lost his scalp to that knife. Scrap of hair and pink hung from the man's belt. That was dripping too, hot and fresh. He'd left the body in the thicket for the wolves to find.

I blew smoky breath into my hands.

'You're a long way from home, Kreagar,' I called down.

The trees took my voice and scattered it to pieces. Winter made skeletons of the forest, see, made camouflage tricky 'less you know what you're doing, and I know exactly what I'm doing. He weren't going to find no tracks nor footprints nowhere in this forest what weren't his, I know better'n that. Kreagar looked all around, up high and 'neath brushes, but I've always been good at hiding.

'Who's that talkin' at me out in the trees?' he shouted. His voice was like rubbing bone on bark. Something raw in it when he raged but when he was kind it was soft rumbling that cut through a chill night. I didn't want to think about him being kind no more. His kindness was lies and masks.

'Saw what you did to that boy,' I said, 'saw where you put him. See his curly hair on your belt.'

Kreagar sniffed hard. Cold making his nose run into his beard. Teeth bared like one of them mountain bears. Didn't even have a shirt on, never did when he did his killing. Blood splashed all over his chest, mingling with the tattoos and wiry black hair.

'That you, Elka girl? That my Elka playing squirrel in the trees?' he shouted.

'I ain't yours,' I said, 'never was, never gonna be.'

I took out my knife. Long blade, barbed saw teeth on the back, and stag-horn handle.

Kreagar stamped around the forest, showing all the critters where he was, trailing blood like a damn invitation.

'Come down, give ole Kreag a hug. I've missed you.'

'I don't think so. Think I'll stay right where I am.'

His eyes searched the trees. Black as pitch them eyes, black as disease and disorder and hate and lies. He grinned, flat white teeth like gravestones, and twirled his little fish gutter in his fingers, flinging blood everywhere, rolling out the red carpet.

'Elka, you know I don't mean you no harm.' His voice turned friendly. 'I'd never hurt my Elka.'

He wandered around like a blind man, trudging through the snow, steam lifting off his body. Always hot after a killing. He was lean, carved out of wood some say and, but for the tattoos, had a face you'd take home to your mother. He

leant up against a cottonwood tree, panting to keep the cold out, getting sick of hide-and-seek.

'Could a' killed you a hundred times, girlie,' he said, slow. 'Could a' taken my pig-sticker and cut you neck to navel while you slept. Could a' peeled your skin off easy as boiled trout.'

I remembered all those years calling him Daddy and felt sick.

'Could a' made my winter boots out of your back,' he carried on, voice getting more excited, smile getting bigger, like he was reeling off courses at a feast. 'New belt out of your arms. Could a' stuffed my mattress with your silky brown hair.'

He laughed and I felt sicker. He raised his knife, pointed it into the trees, right at my face though he didn't know it.

'You'd make a fine pair of boots, Elka girl.'

Heard it all before but it didn't stop the cold creeping up my back, cold that weren't snow. Cold that weren't ice and winter. I heard him say worse but never to me. I was still afraid of him, the things he'd done, the things he made me do. But damn if I wasn't trying to turn it to good.

'All these months you been looking for me, Kreagar, and I found you first.'

I raised up my own knife. Weighted right nice for throwing. I told him in my head to stay there against the tree, told him don't you move a muscle.

'I been worried something rotten for you, Elka. This world ain't no place for a kid like you on your own. There are worse things than wolves in the dark. Worse things than me.'

But for the blood he could have been a normal Joe out on a stroll. But for the kid's scalp swinging in the breeze, he could've been anyone. But he wasn't. He was Kreagar

Hallet. Murdering, kid-killing bastard Kreagar Hallet. Took me far too long to figure that out and no prettied-up words would change it now.

I stood up on the branch without making more'n a snowflake shudder and wound back my arm. Breathed out. Pictured him like a deer. Threw my knife with all the force I had, straight and true and hit him in that soft spot just below the collarbone. That metal went through his shoulder into that tree, pinned him hard, heard that wood-thud you get during target practice. And I'd done a lot of target practice. Damn if that weren't a perfect shot.

Hollered and howled he did, more out of shock than pain. Didn't think his little Elka could throw that hard I'll bet. Kreagar shouted some things I daren't repeat, some threats that shouldn't see light of day. His own blood met the boy's. The fat black lines on his chest now coated red, hot and steaming fresh in the cold.

He tried to pull it out but I cut them barbs deep. He screamed like a dying sow when he tried.

'Get here, girl, I'm gonna rip you up!'

Still looking around for me, screaming up something fierce. He roared at me, filling the forest, making birds flee their nests, rabbits scrabble into their warrens, but he still couldn't see me. Ghost I was in those woods. He'd taught me well.

'I'm gonna find you! I'm gonna kill you slow, Elka!'

I couldn't help but laugh. I had him. Finally. Sprung the trap and caught me a rabid bear.

'Magistrate Lyon's gonna find you first,' I said. 'Told her where you is and where the boy is too. She'll see what you did to him. She's been hunting you a long time, across mountains she's gone, looking for you.'

That shut him up. Colour drained right out of him. Nobody wants Lyon and her six-shooter on their tail and Kreagar had for months. But then, so had I.

He started pleading, trying the friendly on me, but I wasn't hearing it. Strands of spit hung off his beard, flaring out with every breath. I watched him until I heard the clomping horse hooves, kicking up snow and soil. Steam rising off hard-ridden flanks. I smiled. Magistrate Lyon and her lieutenants, here to bring in the bad guy. Another life and that bad guy could a' been me.

No reward a' course, gold don't mean nothing to me no more, only life got value in my mind.

I saw them coming through the trees, Kreagar still stuck and hollering, panicking and pulling on the handle, that blood trail leading them right to his feet.

Lyon's smarter than Kreagar, got eyes like a sparrow hawk, she'd see me in half a breath and she'd take me too, for what I done. She'd have questions. Big ones I didn't feel much like answering.

Kreagar heard them hooves, heard them whinnying mares. His eyes went wide like a buck about to be shot and that's when I got to leave it up to the law. Shame about the knife, that skinned me many a rabbit and marten, saved my life more'n once too. A good knife is hard to come by, about as hard as finding a good person in this damned country. When your life is your only currency and you got debts to pay, a good knife can make all the difference. I might've lost my blade but I paid my debt. Lyon shouldn't come looking for me no more. 'Less a' course, Kreagar tells her the truth.

THE BEGINNING
OR CLOSE AS YOU GONNA GET

When the thunderhead comes, drumming through the sky, you take cover, you lock your doors and you find a place to pray because if it finds you, there ain't no going back. When the thunderhead came to Ridgeway, my clapboard town, I had nowhere to hide. Seven years old I was and screaming up something fierce at my nana. She wanted me to go collect pine resin for the lamps. Said it made 'em burn with a pretty smell. I told her pretty is for fools and I didn't want no pine smelling up my house.

'My house, girl,' she said, 'you just a guest here till your parents come back. Pray that it be soon.'

I think I had a different name back then. Don't remember Nana ever calling me Elka.

I told her to go spit seeds and started howling.

'That mouth of yours is black as the goddamn devil's,' she shouted in that tone what meant I was in for a beating. Saw her reaching for her walking stick. Had me welts the shape a' that stick fresh on my back.

'My mouth ain't nothin', you ain't my momma, you can't tell me nothin'.' I was wailing and trying my damnedest to push over the eating table, to send all them plates and three types a' fork scattering all over. That'd show her, I figured, show her good.

Nana let out one a' her big sighs. Seen other old folk in Ridgeway sigh like that, like they weren't just sick a' the person giving them ire but sick a' the world what was full a' them. All them years, Nana must a' been hundreds, all them wrinkles creasing up her face, that sigh is what them years sound like, wheezing, long, and dog-tired.

'Your momma,' Nana said, 'my fool of a daughter, running off with that man.' She looked at me like I was Momma for a minute, kindness in her eye, then must a' seen that Daddy half a' me and got mad again. She clenched up all her teeth so hard I wondered brief if they was going to crack and fly out her head.

'They coming back to get me,' I said, whining voice full a' tears. 'Daddy gonna show you the back a' his hand for beating me.'

Nana laughed, high-pitched and trilling like a shrike bird. 'Your daddy's too busy hunting gold up in the North and your momma's too busy shining his boots to think of you, girl. You're stuck with me and I'm stuck with you so you better go out and get that resin or so help me child I'll beat you blue.'

Nana's fists was tight and her body was shaking. She was a rake of a woman but she was Mussa valley born, built head to toe out a' grit and stubborn. She had strength in her what you'd never credit behind that paper skin. Broke my arm once, she did, with just them hands a' hers.

I crossed my arms over my chest and I huffed and I said

I didn't want no pine and I hated pine 'bout as much as I hated her.

Then she threw up her arms, sick of me, and said she was going walking.

'Don't you follow me,' she said. 'I don't even want to look at you no more.'

She'd been gone not half an hour when the sky boomed black, cut out the sun. Sounded like a mountain splitting apart. No matter how many times I've heard that since, I get the fear. Cold runs up my bones from my toes to my skull. I shake. I sweat like a snow fox in summer. All because of that day. All because my nana left me alone when the thunderhead came.

Our little two-room shack, far out in the forest, didn't stand a chance against that weather. Nana said her and Grandpa, afore he died in the Second Conflict some twenty years past, rebuilt that shack a hundred times and she'd rebuild it a hundred more no doubt. Nana and me was like butting rams most days but not all my thoughts a' that shack were dark. When that thunderhead came, I sure as shit wanted that woman and them iron arms round my shoulders.

I saw the thunderhead coming down from the north, rolling 'tween the hills at the top of our valley. Our idiot valley. Acted like a corral, funnelled all that raging storm right toward our forest, our front door, and to Ridgeway a few miles down the way. It kicked up rocks and broken branches and mashed them all together with ice and rain. I saw it out the window, roaring down the hill like a grizzly in heat.

Ground shook. My toes went cold. The roof ripped off and smashed against the cedars. I don't remember screaming

but I'm sure I was. Felt like all hell was coming down on my seven-year-old shoulders. Cracking thunder all but deafened me. Hail and rain all but froze me solid. I hid under the eating table, arms and legs wrapped tight around its leg, and shouted at it all to go away, leave me be. Shouted for my nana to come back. Cursed her name more'n once.

Then I was in the air. Table lifted up like a dry leaf and afore I knew it, I was too high to let go. I dug my nails into the wood and scrunched up my eyes. Rocks and twigs snagged at me, cut up my arms and legs, pulled out my hair in clumps. Tiny balls of ice hit my face and felt like hot metal filings. That wind threw me and the table around like we was nothing. Only existing for the fun of the thunder. Table got ripped away or I let go, I don't know. Spinning and careening and screaming. No idea if sky was up, rock was down or if I was already dead.

I don't know much a' what happened next. The storm must a' let me go, had enough of playing. Next thing I knew I was falling, rushing air pulling at me, storm passing off to the east. Head-first into the Thick Woods. I fell through close branches, smells of cedar and alder and cypress. Cradled me, slowed me, till one a' them branches didn't want to let me go. My vest ripped and snagged and I was swinging ten feet up from the dirt. Felt blood on me and cuts stinging and my lungs was stripped from screaming. Then my vest ripped and I dropped. Landed with a thud on the moss, a pain shooting right up my back.

Dazed, I was. I remember that clear as spring. The thunderhead blew itself out over the ridge. They never last long though they make sure you never forget them. I sat in that same spot in the Thick Wood, swaying, gathering up all that had just happened in my baby head. Trying to make

some kind a' sense of it all. Could a' been ten minutes. Could a' been half a day. Think it was when I started to get hungry that I snapped out of it.

Everything was green and brown. Couldn't see the sky for the branches. Couldn't see more'n a few feet in front of me. Lucky I was small and could squeeze 'tween the trunks.

'Nana,' I shouted. 'Nana, where you at?'

But the forest didn't answer. Didn't take me long to realise Nana weren't coming.

She said we lived south in the valley. Ridgeway town was souther still. Showed it me on a map one time. I figured the thunderhead came from the north so that's where it took me back to. My young head said go south. South was down on the map so that's the way I went. Down any hill I could find.

Got lost quick.

I tried picturing all those places on that map of BeeCee. That's what we call our country now, just letters of its real name what most people have forgot or don't care to remember. The map said that old name behind all the scribblings, all the new borders and territories my nana drawn on, but I could only read letters then, not whole words. All I know is that one day all the maps became useless and we had to make our own. The old'uns called that day the Fall or the Reformation. Nana said some down in the far south called it Rapture. Nana was a babe when it happened, said her momma called it the Big Damn Stupid. Set everything back to zero. I never asked why, never much cared. Life is life and you got to live it in the here-now not the back-then. And the here-now for little me was the Thick Woods with night coming fast.

I had these little boots on, cute things stitched from

marten pelt, soft and warm but no good for travelling. They tore up in a few hours. The thunderhead torn a swatch out a' the knee of my denims and them trees had chewed up my vest so's it was barely hanging onto me. Seven-year-old me walked till it got dark. Belly rumbling worse than the storm. I started crying proper then, big fat tears, blubbering and wailing. I huddled myself inside a hollowed-out log as the darkness crept through the trees. Bugs and grubs crawled all over me. I shivered so hard it shook rotten wood dust into my hair.

Never been alone before. Always had Nana close by and afore her, though I barely remember them, my momma and dad. Nana said they'd gone north, far far up the world to find their fortune and bring it home to me. That was a few years ago. They sent a letter 'bout a year after they went, brought to the Ridgeway general store by some kind traveller heading that way. I couldn't read it course but I made Nana read it to me till I knew all them words like I know my own name. Words like gold and sluice and them what sounded foreign and exciting: Halveston, the Great YK, Carmacks, Martinsville. My momma and daddy's names. I made Nana read them over and over. Made the world and them sound close and far all at one time, that letter did. I kept it 'neath my pillow, ink fading with readings and years. Put an ache in my chest thinking the thunderhead took it.

I sniffed hard, sucked up all my fears, and tried to sleep. Worst night of my life that was. No matter all them nights that came after. No matter all those cold, dark things that happened. That one night was the worst. It was the first time I realised that you're all you've got in this world. One moment you can be in your home, fire in the grate, clothes on your back, your kin nattering beside you, the next

moment you're lost. Taken up by the thunderhead and dropped into nowhere. No point fixating on all those other things. My nana weren't here, that letter weren't here. My parents sure as shit weren't here. I had me and I had this log and, though I would've loved some hot stew right then, I couldn't much complain. I wriggled about, got somewhere close to comfort and shut my eyes.

Something scratched at the side of the log. Claws running down bark. My eyes sprung open.

My heart damn-near stopped. Night was full, I must a' been sleeping. Moonlight cut through the branches. Sky's always crystal after a storm, almost brighter'n day sometimes. But these woods were thick and old and I couldn't see further than the swaying fern tips an arm's reach outside the log.

Fern twitched. Heart raced.

Scrabbling got louder. Came closer.

I stopped breathing, hoping it wouldn't find me. I thought I saw bear claws, heard big grizzly sniffling. Forest was playing tricks. I burst out that log quicker than a rabbit down a hole and ran. Ran and ran and ran. Didn't look back once. Not a clue how long I ran for, how far. Then I smelt smoke and saw a light.

'Nana,' I shouted. 'Nana! I found you!'

The hut sat square in a small clearing. This weren't Nana's shack. This place was smaller. A pipe out the roof puffed smoke and the light spilling out the window showed the fire inside was burning hot. A wooden awning came off the front, propped up with two thick trunks and below it, close to the door, two A-frames stretching deer hide. Dozen or so metal traps clinked together, hung over a branch. Wire snares, broken and not, littered all over the ground

and hanging from trees. Thin strips of red meat dried on racks. Sight of them made my belly grumble and filled up my mouth with water. Nana always told me not to steal from good folks but I figured there were so many the trapper wouldn't miss just one strip. 'Sides I didn't know if he was good folks and Nana never said nothing 'bout stealing from the bad'uns.

I snuck up, quiet as a wolf on the hunt, listening all around for trouble. The racks were just under the awning and I had to pass by one of the windows. I told myself I was a shadow, invisible in the dark and I could run so fast no fat old trapper could catch me. The smell of that meat was a drug. That metallic tang, that sting of salt and smoke. I thought I could smell juniper in it, maybe even some apple wood. Sweet and salty and close enough to touch. I yanked a wide strip of that jerky and a high-pitched bell rang at the door. Smart trapper. Alarmed his dinner in case of bears and hungry girls.

Big boots stomped inside. I shoved the jerky in my mouth and ran. Couldn't tell what meat it was, deer or moose or something else, but it tasted as good as it smelt. The hut door flung open. The trapper didn't shout but I looked back anyway. Hat on his head, just a black shape, but he had a shotgun. Wasn't no law out in those parts and he had every right to shoot a thief on his land. I forced my tired legs to run.

Then I heard him coming after me.

I was a hare darting quick and low and quiet. He was a lumbering ox, crashing through.

My heart thundered. I didn't want to die in that forest, shot for taking a mouthful of meat I didn't even get to enjoy. Curse that thunderhead for dropping me here. I cried and

bawled. Must a' been screaming. That trapper followed me close. He never shouted for me to stop, same as you don't shout for a buck to stop afore you pull the trigger.

He's going to kill me, I thought. Shoot me to shreds.

A trailing scrap of fur on my boots caught on a branch, tripped me. Don't know how I kept that jerky in my mouth but I did, even as I fell ass over face into a dry creek bed. Landed face-first in the dirt and everything went quiet. No more ox crashing. No more footsteps.

I'd lost him. I got the better of that trapper. Got his jerky and got away. I sat up on my knees and ripped off a chunk of that meat, swallowed it whole.

Something made me look over my shoulder. That feeling you get in your bones when someone is watching you. A shadow stood over me.

Big and black and breathing. I didn't even see the butt of the shotgun.

Woke up in the trapper's hut with a sore head wrapped in bandage. He sat on a chair by the door, staring at me with eyes like the devil. Shotgun rested against his leg, his hat on his knee. He must a' fallen too, his face was all covered in streaks of black dirt.

'Where'd you come from?' he said. His voice had a breath of kindness to it.

Nana told me not to speak to strangers, and this man, living far out in the woods all by himself, was the strangest I'd met.

'Where you going to?' he said. Didn't seem all that surprised I weren't talking. 'You got a momma and daddy? Where they at?'

I blinked then, shook my head. 'Just my nana.'

He smiled, showed off a row of flat white teeth.

'Now we gettin' somewhere,' he said. 'Where you and your nana live? Dalston? Ridgeway?'

Something in my face must have gave me away.

'Ridgeway then,' he said. He rubbed his cheek but none of the mud came off. 'You a long way from home, girl.'

He put his hand on the shotgun barrel and relaxed in his chair.

'You can just point me the right way,' I said, 'and I'll be gone afore you know it.'

'There are beasts in these woods would eat you up quicker'n you can scream. Couldn't let you do that.'

I shuffled a bit on the bed, felt my cheeks get hot and red. I couldn't tell much about the trapper, other than he wore old denims like me and his shirt was ripped like mine. A coat made of fur and skins hung next to the door with a pair of snowshoes propped up under. His shirt, once white, had spots and smears of something dark brown on it, maybe dried blood from the animals. He stared at me long and hard and my belly started growling again.

'I ain't got no real way of telling if you're speaking true or false,' he said. 'You could be a trouble maker on the run from the law. You could be a thief and stolen worse than a bite of jerky. You could be anyone.'

My nana would a' said I was a troublemaker but I weren't telling him that.

'I'm headin' down to Ridgeway in the morning to trade some pelts, two-day round trip mind.' He stopped, rubbed his face again, mud stayed put and by then I weren't sure if it was really mud.

'Your business is your own, girlie, but I'll do some asking and see if I can find your nana. If I do and she wants you back, I'll take you to her.'

'I'll help you find her quicker,' I said, scooting off the edge of the bed. I got dizzy then and fell down, landed hard on my hands and knees.

The trapper didn't move to help me, just said, 'You couldn't walk more'n a mile in that state. You're just a baby, no more than a few winters on you. You're dead weight until you can carry a rifle.

'Go to sleep,' he said and picked up his hat. 'I'll be gone when you wake up. Keep the fire lit and don't touch nothing.'

He put his hat over his face and leant his head back against the door.

I climbed back onto the bed and pulled up the blanket. 'You got a name?' I asked.

'I got a few,' he said, without moving his hat.

Something in the way he said that put a seed of fear in me. I pulled the blanket up close to my chin and hunkered down. There was no chance of me sleeping that night. I didn't take my eyes off him. He didn't make a sound all night. Not a snore. Not a sniff. Didn't move, didn't even let go of the shotgun. Even my nana slept louder than that. He was like one of them statues carved out of stone. Nana took me down to Couver City to see them last summer. She said I needed *culturing*, whatever that meant. Couver was hit hard in the Damn Stupid, says Nana, and only a few of them statues are left in the ruins. Three-day ride up and down that was. After six days in the saddle, sitting awkward 'tween Nana and the horse's neck, I told her I didn't care for culturing.

I must've slept because one moment I was fixing my eyes on the trapper and the next it was dawn and the chair was empty. Shotgun and him were gone. Keep the fire lit, he said, and don't touch nothing. I never been much good

at following the say-so of grown-ups, not even now I'm grown-up myself.

First thing I did was get another strip of jerky from the rack outside. Then I stoked up the fire and roasted up that jerk so it was crispy and charred at the edges, and I had me a fine breakfast. Then I went through the trapper's things. Found a few coins no one uses no more, bowls carved out a' cherry wood, a little wooden box locked up tight, and a knife sharp enough to skin a boar in three seconds flat. It had a long bone handle, probably deer or moose leg, and the blade was longer'n my forearm. Beautiful thing, I remember thinking, and I sliced up my jerky just to feel it in action. I told myself then that I would have a knife like this. Maybe I could get the trapper to make me one.

I got bored quick. Two-day trip to Ridgeway and back he said. Meant I was further from Nana than I'd ever been and I didn't know north or south or up or down or which way would take me back to Nana. Shit, by then, that knife in my hands and no grown-up telling me what for, I weren't even sure I wanted to go back.

Trapper didn't have much of anything and, once I had a full belly, I didn't have nothing to occupy me. I went outside, kicked dirt, climbed trees, watched the sun reach noon and start falling into dusk. I wondered if he'd reached Ridgeway yet. If he'd asked around about me. Strange that he didn't ask for my name. Strange that he didn't ask where'bouts in Ridgeway I lived. Because, strictly, I didn't live in Ridgeway. Nana's shack was up the valley. Enough people in town knew about us that I thought he wouldn't have no problem finding her.

I kept the fire hot and twirled that bone-handle knife in my little hands. Thinking of all the things I could do with

it. How thin I could slice jerky, how neat and quick I could kill a rabbit. Night came fast with those thoughts swimming inside me and I fell asleep on the floor by the fire.

Woke up to spring dawn singing through the trees and spent that day much as I had the last, exploring the land, finding rabbit runs. I even reset one a' the trapper's squirrel poles what must a' fallen in the thunderhead.

Sun was dipping and I was sucking on another piece of meat, knife in hand, when the trapper came back. He came in the door with a sack over his shoulder. He stared at me, jerky hanging out my mouth and blade in my hands, and he didn't say nothing. Something in his head ticked over and he stopped a beat, then dropped the sack with a sound like logs tumbling off a pile.

'Found your nana,' he said and hung up his coat.

Felt a sting in me, like my fun was cut short and I'd be back to beatings and her schooling tomorrow. I set down the knife on the floor and I stared at that blade like I was giving up my favourite toy.

'You takin' me back tomorrow?' I said. Part a' me wanted to see my nana, but I knew soon as she saw me she'd have me hauling planks to fix the shack or learning letters at that whiteboard a' hers.

Then he said, 'Your nana got caught out in the thunderhead, tree fell on her.'

'She dead?'

Trapper nodded once and kept his eyes on me.

Shame on me that my first thinking was hot damn, I don't got to go back to schooling. Shame on me twice that my second was serves her right for treating me rough. Then came the aching like my insides was full a' river mud, thick and sucking me down, a deep place a' sorrow I didn't

want no part of. I weren't all that sure how to feel in them moments. Should I be crying? But I didn't feel nothing like crying. Should I be whooping for joy? But I didn't feel like doing that neither. I stared at that knife, chewing on that jerky, quiet-like for an age. Trapper didn't say nothing, he just watched me, waiting to see what I'd do, what kind a' person I was.

He shifted his foot, floorboard creaked. My eyes was locked on that blade and my head and my heart came together and told me how to feel. I reached for the knife.

Soon as I touched that white bone handle I realised quick I chose right. I didn't much want to go back to Nana's shack, she never let me eat jerky and play with knives. Her ways were learning letters and sums, clean hands and clean clothes. Them ways weren't mine and, much as she'd tried to force it, they never would be.

The trapper nodded to the meat 'tween my teeth.

'You like that?' he asked.

I nodded.

'You know how to use that knife?'

I weren't quite sure what he meant but I nodded again.

'You ever skinned a hare?'

I flinched then. I had, year or two ago, but when Nana caught me she whipped my back bloody. Second time she caught me she broke my arm.

'You ever skinned a hare, girl?' he asked again, something raw in his voice.

'Yes, sir, I have.'

'If you can skin a hare you can 'bout skin anything,' he said and pointed to the sack. 'Traded my furs for a pig. I already jointed it for easy carryin'. Take off the skin and fat, take off the meat, and cut it thin for smokin'. Got it?'

I nodded and stepped forward. The trapper lifted up the sack and poured out the chunks of pig. Pink skin and pale flesh, it would work fine with apple wood, I could almost taste it already. Even though I was just seven, I always knew I was born to work a knife. Took me most of the night but I did it, and all while the trapper watched over me, sipping on a flask. He didn't once tell me to be careful. Didn't say much 'cept 'other way', when I got to separating the knuckle.

Come dawn we both laid the strips on racks and hung them up in the tiny smokehouse outside.

The trapper put a hand on my shoulder then and said, 'You got a gift with a blade, girlie, I'll teach you to use it right. Names don't mean nothing in these woods but I got to call you something.'

Then he looked at me, pulled at my scruffy hair.

'Rougher'n elk's fur, this,' he said.

So he called me Elka, 'stead of Elk, on account of me being a girl. I stopped asking for his name after a few weeks and just called him Trapper in my head. He taught me to tie a snare, taught me to set a deadfall trap and shoot a squirrel from fifty yards. All I had to do was help him clean the kills, prep the traps, stretch and scrape the furs, and tend to the hut. I slept on the floor by the fire and him in his bed. Though, thinking about it, I don't think he slept much. He hunted a lot at night, said the wolves come out at night but he never brought back a wolf pelt.

That was my life then and damn if it weren't fun. I was a new person, I forgot my old name quick, and I was Elka from then on. I could make a bow and arrow from sticks and shoot me a marten. I forgot my sums and my letters. I forgot my nana and near forgot my folks, though them words in the letter never went out my head. All them skills

Trapper taught me I remember to this day but there are big ole patches a' them years that are fuzzy and dark, whole months a' winter what went in a blink. Much as I tried, I couldn't fill up them gaps.

But hell, I was an idiot kid. Trapper was my family even though I didn't know a sure thing about him but I figured quick I didn't know much more 'bout my parents and they was kin. Trapper was the kind a' family you choose for yourself, the kind that gets closer'n blood. He was my daddy from then, I just needed to find myself a momma.