

## An Unbearable Situation

Our encounter left us unscathed; contrary to the bear's. Wounded by my father, the brownie took flight, staging a dangerous scenario. Father accepted responsibility to put the injured beast out of its misery and a neighboring rancher volunteered to accompany him. Pete and I fed off our mother's foreboding: I, a girl of twelve and my brother, nine, homesteading with our parents on Kodiak Island, nearly thirty years into the twentieth century, were scared out of our wits!

Father had ridden over to the Ramsey's homestead after the attack. He and Mark Ramsey planned to start early the following morning, since tracking an injured bear at night was unsafe.

Father recounted the incident to Mr. Ramsey. "He almost got them!" he declared. "That bore came right through the cabin door and raided the larder like a gang of marauders. Made a mess of the place. The kids said, if it hadn't been for their raven, the brute would have gobbled them up! They claimed he tried to climb the loft ladder to get at them. That's when their crazy bird came to their rescue."

Father described our pet raven, Magus', onslaught: he and Mother drove up in the wagon in time to witness a bear charge outside with a manic bird clinging to it, pecking and clawing. Father drew his rifle and fired a hasty shot. Maimed, the fiend took off.

The following morning, Pete and I awoke in our beds to semi-darkness of cloud and rain. An amber light from a lantern glowed from the floor below.

We heard Mr. Ramsey remark: "Morning James, Mattie. It'll be a soggy trail, today. If the rain's washed the blood-tellings, the mud'll leave prints."

My father spoke: "He couldn't have gotten very far. We'll be lucky if he bled-out. Teck here, will help track him." We heard the hound's tail thump several times at his name.

We poked our heads over the edge to see Mr. Ramsey nod. "Thanks for the coffee, Mattie," he said and rose from the table.

Father turned to Mother. "We'll be back before sundown tomorrow," he reassured her and pecked her cheek. Father spied us and gave us wave, leaving strict orders, "Go no further than the barn!"

The men slid their rifles into their packs and mounted. Father, astride our Belgian mare, Jem, and Mr. Ramsey on his jenny-mule, made an odd pair. Teck trotted behind. Our Belgian gelding, Jay, neighed in protest at being left behind while Magus, gave a farewell, *caw!* My stomach knotted as I watched them ride off.

Mother wouldn't allow us to be idle. Basic chores, and clean-up from the bear's rampage, beckoned. Livestock, too, needed tending. Over the next day-and-a-half, Pete and I spooked at the slightest sound; we were jumpier than late-summer grasshoppers. Mother's concern manifested in busyness.

By the end of the first day, Pete reported, "I've done my chores! Where's Magus?"

"It's spring, and *he* may have joined those passing ravens," Mother suggested. We knew he couldn't go very far, due to a crippled wing. "I bet he'll be back by nightfall," she added.

When the daylight faded on the second day, Magus hadn't returned and Mother's anxiety made her short with us. We all ate a solemn meal and retired. The long night was spent with somber thoughts, enhanced by the heavy spring rain.

"Jen? You 'wake?" Pete's whisper pierced my restless ears.

"Uh-huh."

"Do you think somethin's happened to them?"

"Nothing's happened to them, it's just taking longer . . ." I vacantly replied. Sleep finally came as the night waned.

*Caw! Caw! Caw!* heralded Magus' homecoming. Both Pete and I wrestled from our sheets and dashed down to greet him. As I flung the door open, bright sunlight assailed us. We squinted to see Magus strutting on the gable above. He squawked, gurgled and feebly flapped his wings as if he'd journeyed far.

"He's telling us somethin'!" noted Pete.

Some things in this world are unexplainable; I was one. Mother claimed I had a *gift*. Father called me intuitive and neighbors considered me odd: I, was able to "see" pictures of animals' thoughts.

"What do you see?" pleaded Pete.

I gazed at Magus. His ebony eyes peered into mine and he quieted. I closed my eyes to "see". Rapidly, pictures flashed; I attempted to comprehend them. Pete grabbed my arm when I gasped.

"The bear eat 'em?" he hollered.

Mother, now roused by our noise, emerged from the cabin. Seeing her red eyes, I wondered if she had had a premonition.

Shaken, she asked, "News?"

"The bear attacked and," I hesitated, "one is down!"

"Where are they? How long ago?" pressed Peter and Mother.

I closed my eyes. Recalling the images, I described them: a clearing, surrounded by gnarled trees, close to a cliff overlooking a rocky beach.

"That sounds like False Haven Cove!" blurted Mother. "That's ten miles north! We need help. Jen, you and Pete ride over to the Ramsey's. Tell Mrs. Ramsey to gather folks for a search party. Come straight back!" We did as told.

By the time Pete and I returned home with Mrs. Ramsey and three other neighbors, Mother had the evening meal set. Helen Ramsey and my mother embraced, then went inside. The men followed. Mrs. Ramsey told Mother, "I sent Mark Jr. for the doctor to wait . . ." Her voice broke. Mother consoled her with a hug.

Pete and I began to panic. Seeing this, Mother sent us to gather up Mr. Simms' wagon-team, along with Mr. Frank's and Mr. Lester's horses, to be watered and fed. Upon returning, we ate while the grown-ups made plans.

"We'll set out in the mornin'," declared Mr. Frank. "Listen Mattie. You, Helen and the kids wait here. It'll be a slog to the cove, if that's where they are. Jim's wagon won't make it through that brush and bog. He'll have to ride one of his team."

To our surprise, Mother's face shone a with pang of promise. Jim Simms' pipe almost fell from his mouth as Mother unveiled a plan. "Jim," she began, "hitch up our gelding and your mare. Take the sledge in the barn, it'll handle the muck. And, if anyone is injured," she paused for a quick breath and continued, "it'll haul them. I'm sure our Jay will find Jem!"

Silence followed. Pete and I gaped at each other.

"Mother, Jay'll find her! And Father!" I cried. The decision was made.

At sunup, we prepped the horses and assisted Mr. Simms with the sledge. Thirty minutes later, the men set off. We watched with spirits raised.

Magus cawed. "I bet you're hungry, aren't you?" I asked. As I watched him feed on some table-scrap, I detected he had more to tell.

The clear day drew to a starry night. Mother and Mrs. Ramsey sat by the kitchen stove, restively crocheting. Pete and I watched the sky dance with stars until Mother herded us to bed.

Late the next morning, Pete and I woke to bustling sounds and voices from the kitchen below. A man's joined the ladies'. "Well sir, I wouldn't have believed it. We hadn't got far when Jay picked up a track. Darn'd if he didn't let up!" I recognized Mr. Frank's speech. "Few miles later, we found 'em. It looked like a whirlin' dervish struck 'em. We'd been there a spell and lo'n behold, their critters showed up. That mare of yer's was right perky to see her pal," he chuckled. Pete and I peered over edge to catch his every word. "They should be here before dark. It's slow, pullin' that sledge. Good idea ya had there, Mattie."

"Are they okay?" Pete called down.

Mr. Frank hollered back, "They're no 'worse for wear' after a bear. Yer dad's alright, just some busted ribs and some scrapes. Mark took a beating, mauled pretty bad."

Mrs. Ramsey broke into tears. Mother soothed her. "I often begged him to leave this island," she sobbed. "He's had enough bear situations!"

Mr. Frank shifted uncomfortably, then continued. "We found 'em 'long the cliff near False Haven Cove. They were a mess, but 'live. That darn'd dog of Jame's helped save 'em, 'long with a raven. I'll let yer papa tell that story. Meanwhile, I'll go fetch the doc."

With the mention of a raven, Pete's eyes copped mine. *Is that where Magus had gone?* we wondered.

In the late afternoon, Magus' cawing announced the arrival of the rescue party. Dr. Ross and Mr. Frank rode in soon after and helped take the men inside; Mr Ramsey, they placed on our parent's bed and Father, they helped sit at the kitchen table. Us kids and the ranchers were shoood outside to care for the horses. While the doctor attended to Mr. Ramsey's wounds, Mother bound Father's ribs and washed and dressed his gashes. With our tasks finished, we returned and found a place to settle.

Father, hunched over a hot cup of coffee, asked, "Where's Teck?" We heard a, *thump-thump*, response from a corner.

"He's right here," Mother answered.

"Good boy!" he said, followed by more thumps. "If it hadn't been for him *and*," Father paused to glare at us, "your foolish bird, we'd be bear fodder!"

"We *told* you he saved us from that bear," insisted Pete. "He saved you and Mr. Ramsey, too!"

Mother reined in Pete's excitement. "Hush! Let your papa speak," she demanded.

Father sipped his coffee and commenced. "The night's rain had washed away the blood-trail. Fortunately, the brute left a tell-tale swath of broken branches and tracks in the mud. His wound was not fatal; he moved fast! We rode in silence for most of day-one, except for a pest!"

Pete and I giggled, guessing to whom he referred.

"The horses shied at a noise in the trees. It was that rowdy bird!"

"Your pet, James?" kidded Mark."

"That critter's a nuisance! Daughter's pet,' I growled. 'She *understands* him. Don't know why he's followed us. Git!' I shouted. He flapped off into the forest. After that, it got real still - we got real uneasy. We moved on. Several hours later we camped in the rain.

"In the morning, a ground-fog replaced the rain. We don't need to be in murk, tracking a wounded bear, I thought. We mounted and followed Teck, who'd picked up the scent.

"Visibility dropped and Mark gave in to his uneasiness. 'James, let's wait a spell, see if this fog lifts,' he suggested.

"I agreed and we dismounted. The going was slow. 'Where are we Mark?' I asked.

"Near False Haven Cove, I recon. Haven't hunted in these parts,' he confessed and pointed at a bouldery outcrop twenty feet away. 'That's a good denning spot, if he's hold up there.'

"I shivered - there was movement ahead of us.

"Did you see that?' Mark whispered.

"Teck whimpered. I hushed him and motioned to Mark to get his rifle. I did the same.

'Mark, do you feel like . . .'

"We're being watched?' he said, finishing my words.

"The boulders vanished as the fog thickened, disorienting us. Teck began barking. The horse and mule got antsy and fled in panic when a clattering mass of black feathers flew at us from behind. You can take a stab at what *it* was! After that fright, I was fuming!" Father exclaimed. Pete and I cringed.

"Mark laughed. Teck barked and wagged his tail, like he was glad to see the bird. That *thing* pecked my boot! I'd kick it away and it'd come right back. 'Darn bird!' I shouted.

"Mark chuckled, 'Want me to shoot it?'

"I shook my head.

"'Just trying to help,' he snickered.

"The humor drained away as a bloodcurdling, *grrrr*, echoed within the gloom. We raised our rifles.

"'That thing's been tracking us!' whispered Mark.

"'No wonder my skin crawled,' I replied.

"Suddenly, I was knocked hard to the ground and my rifle shot from my hands. Paralyzed with pain, I watched the bear turn and charge Mark! I thought, that's last time Mark'll come face-to-face with a grizzly. That big boy rolled him around awhile, grunting, snapping and snarling. Teck lunged at him. The bear swiped that dog and sent him soaring - I knew he was dead. Enraged, the beast went back for Mark. I heard his muffled screams but he didn't fight back. Good thing! Then Mag-, or what-ever-you-call-him, stormed the bear; went after his eyes. The bear roared as the bird gouged them. I recovered my rifle and fired two shots that spun him round. That thing was so crazed with pain, it leaped back into the mist. It seemed the battle ended.

"I crawled to Mark. He was in bad shape but alive. We had no horses and I wasn't in any condition to move him. We'd have to wait for help. Thank God, we had our packs. I bandaged his wounds and tried to make him comfortable. The bird had disappeared. But, to my relief, Teck returned. He lay beside me, moaning. I was sorely marred but I couldn't imagine what Mark was going through. I stopped most of his bleeding and he lay still, but breathing. We parked in the mud and the dark, praying the bear wouldn't return.

"By morning, sunshine eased our suffering. Wearily, Teck and I checked Mark. He was still with us. I was able to stand and gaze about. Stunned, I discovered we stopped just short of a sheer drop-off. It drew me to its edge and what I saw doused my fear: among the rocks below, lay the broken carcass of the bear. He must have dove off that cliff rushing back into the fog! He won't trouble us again."

Father ended his tale and Mr. Lester filled in the details of their trip home. Pete and I sat dumbfounded.

When Father emptied his cup, Mother helped him hobble to see Mr. Ramsey.

"He was *very* lucky!" pronounced the doctor. "You both were. I think he wants to talk to you. But, not for long," he ordered, adding a reassuring wink. Father nodded.

"Mark?"

Mr. Ramsey opened his eyes at my father's voice. "That bird saved our lives!" he afforded.

Father's face paled. "Yep," he uttered. Tenderly, he placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

The Ramseys stayed over for several nights and we all made do. They left the Island not long after Mr. Ramsey's recovery. Mother sorely missed them after they sailed

As twilight glowed in the western sky, Mother helped Father onto a pallet near the stove. She remained close by during the night. A bed, too, was made-up for Mrs. Ramsey near her husband. Pete and I said our prayers. Mother tucked us in and kissed us. Before I fell asleep, I heard my mother sigh, "Thank you God, they're home," and, Magus, roosting outside, rustle his feathers in agreement.