

On the Run

U.S. Marshalls

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“This is where they died?”

Gus Winter shook his head. “No. Another half hour, at least.”

The fugitive shivered in the cold drizzle that had been falling all day. “Ironic that you’ll die up here, too,” he said.

“If I die, then you’ll die. Help won’t arrive in time to save you. Just like it didn’t arrive in time to save them.”

Them.

Gus kept his expression neutral. They'd stopped in the middle of the rough, narrow trail for the fugitive to catch his breath. He was compact, thickly built and at least twenty years younger than Gus, but his jeans and cotton sweater weren't appropriate for the conditions on the ridge. His socks were undoubtedly cotton, too. He didn't wear a hat or gloves. He carried a hip pack, but he'd already consumed his small bag of trail mix and quart of water.

Three hours-ago, he'd jumped from behind a giant boulder just above a seldom-used trailhead up Cold Ridge, stuck a gun in Gus's face and ordered him to get moving. Now they were on an open stretch of bald rock at three thousand feet in the White Mountains of New Hampshire on an unsettled October afternoon.

The weather would get worse. Soon.

Gus looked out at the mist, fog and drizzle. The hardwoods with their brightly colored autumn leaves had given way to more and more evergreens. At just over four thousand feet, he and the fugitive would be above the tree line.

Gus said, "Most hypothermia deaths occur on days just like today."

"That right?"

"It doesn't have to be below zero to die of the cold."

The fugitive hunched his shoulders as if to combat his shivering. He had a stubbly growth of beard, which made sense given the story he'd told Gus about escaping from a federal prison in Rhode Island two days ago. His dark eyes showed none of the discomfort he had to be feeling.

Gus wasn't winded, and he was warm enough in his layers of moisture-wicking fabrics and his lined, waterproof jacket. He wore a wool hat, wind-resistant gloves, wool socks and waterproof hiking boots. His backpack was loaded with basic supplies, but he couldn't reach back for anything, take it off, unzip a compartment.

If he did, the fugitive had said he'd shoot him.

The fugitive coughed, still breathing hard. Sweat trickled down his temples into his three-day stubble. "I'm not dying of the cold."

"Try not to sweat," Gus said. "Sweating is a cooling mechanism. The water evaporates on your skin and promotes heat loss. You don't want that."

"You want me to freeze to death."

"No. I want you to give yourself up. Walk back down the mountain with me."

The fugitive stepped back behind Gus and waved his gun, a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson that he must have picked up somewhere between prison and New Hampshire. "Get moving."

"It's a good idea to keep moving, but not so hard and fast that you sweat. It's easier to stay warm than to get warm."

"Shut up."

Gus started back along the trail and heard the crunch of small stones as the fugitive fell in behind him. The trail dropped off sharply to their left, and in the valley below, the bright orange leaves of hardwoods managed to penetrate the gray. Every autumn, leaf-peepers flocked to northern New England to see the stunning foliage. Today, in the rain and fog, they would be gathered in front of fires at cozy inns and restaurants, or headed home.

Gus realized it wasn't his bad luck that the one person in the White Mountains with a gun had found him. The fugitive had targeted him. Watched for him.

Why?

Before long, the valley would disappear in the fog and low cloud cover, and dusk came early this time of year. Even with the flashlight he had in his pack, Gus knew it would be increasingly difficult, perhaps impossible, to see from one trail marker to the next. The fugitive wouldn't find his way on his own. He didn't know Cold Ridge. Gus did. He'd lived in its shadows, hiked its trails his entire life—not counting his two years in the army. He'd come home at twenty expecting to get married, have a couple of kids.

Things had worked out differently.

Because of the ridge and its dangers.

"There's a shoot-to-kill order out on me," the fugitive said, matter-of-fact.

"No such thing."

"Liar."

Gus stepped over a smooth, slippery rock. "The purpose of deadly force isn't to kill. Its purpose is to stop you—someone—from killing or seriously injuring someone else. It's about public safety. It's not about killing."

The fugitive snorted. "Why not shoot me in the knee?"

"Shoot you in the knee, and you can still fire off a round or stab someone. Apply deadly force, and you can't. But if you live—then you live. The purpose was to stop you, not to kill you."

"You'd shoot to kill me if you had the chance."

"Toss your gun off the ridge." Although he wasn't known for his patience, Gus kept his tone reasonable, persuasive. "Let's walk back down the trail together. Keeping your gun pointed at me puts you at risk of getting shot yourself. If the police see you—"

"It's just you and me up here. And the ghosts. Don't try to fool me. I know we're almost there."

Yes, Gus thought as he led the fugitive around a familiar bend in the trail. They were almost there.

He slowed his pace, mindful of the slippery rock, and the fugitive moved in closer. "You're picturing yourself firing your Glock into my chest, aren't you?"

Gus didn't own a Glock. "I'm picturing you wrapped up in a blanket in front of a nice fire in a woodstove. Safe. No worries about tripping and falling up here. No worries about hypothermia. No worries about getting yourself shot."

"A .40-caliber Glock." The fugitive's teeth chattered, but derision had crept into his voice. "Isn't that what you carry, Mr. Senior Deputy U.S. Marshal Winter?"

Gus maintained his steady pace. He saw now what had happened three hours ago.

The fugitive believed he'd snatched a federal agent.

Specifically, Gus's nephew, Nate Winter, a senior deputy U.S. marshal visiting from Washington. He and Gus had similar builds and were just thirteen years apart in age. Wearing a hat, carrying a pack, Gus could understand how someone could think he was Nate.

He didn't correct the fugitive's mistake.

The trail became steeper, and the drizzle turned to light rain. Behind him, Gus could hear the fugitive shuddering and shivering, cursing at the cold. "You're in first-stage hypothermia," Gus said. "Shivering is your body's way of trying to get

warm. Your core temperature is already below normal. You're still conscious and alert, but you won't stay that way."

"I'm fine. Keep walking."

"As your core temperature drops below ninety, your coordination will become more and more impaired. You'll become weaker. Lethargic. Confused."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"You'll stop shivering." Gus had explained the stages of hypothermia to countless hikers over the past thirty years. "You'll be at an increased risk of cardiac arrest."

"It won't happen—"

"It is happening. It's happening to you right now."

"I'll take your gear and leave you. You'll freeze long before I do."

"You need me to get you off this mountain alive," Gus said calmly.

"All I have to do is go downhill."

"It's not that simple. You're in a wilderness area. The main trails are to the south. Even if you managed to avoid falling off a cliff—even if you didn't run out of potable water—and you made it off the mountain, you'd still be miles from the nearest help."

The fugitive was breathing hard now. "More lies."

"I'm just telling you how it is," Gus said. "And no matter what you do—leave me, take me with you—you'll still be wet and cold. It'll be dark soon. Do you know how to protect yourself from the cold overnight?"

"Stop talking."

Gus pretended to stumble slightly on the trail and deliberately ran into a half-dead spruce tree. A sharp stick-like lower branch dug into his cheek and drew blood. He gave an exaggerated yelp of pain and let a few drops of the blood drip onto the gray granite at his feet.

"Hold up." The fugitive shoved his gun into Gus's back and sniffled, but he didn't stop shivering. "The blood. Clean it up. Use your glove. Do a good job."

Squatting down on one knee, Gus used the thumb of his black, windproof glove to wipe up the blood, which was already mixing with the rain water.

The fugitive stood over him. "Think I'm stupid? I know what you're doing. You're leaving a trail for your marshal friends." He squinted down at the cleaned-up blood spot. "Back on your feet. Don't try that again."

Gus shrugged as he rose up straight. "No one would notice a few drops of blood in this wilderness."

"A search dog would."

Gus pressed a gloved finger to the cut on his cheek, as if he didn't dare let more blood fall onto the trail, but as he started back up the trail, he noted the snapped branch on the spruce with satisfaction. A search-and-rescue team wouldn't miss it. Just as they wouldn't miss the other clues he'd left during the past three hours.

His bread-crumbs trail.

He'd participated in enough mountain rescues over the years to know how they operated. By now, Nate and his wife and his two sisters and their husbands—all gathered in Cold Ridge for a long weekend—would have realized Gus's quick walk up the trail had gone bad. They'd do a fast-and-easy search for him before notifying the authorities, who'd launch an official search.

Were they thinking, even now, that he'd simply gone off trail and fallen? Or were they aware that an armed-and-dangerous fugitive was in the area?

Did they know his name, what he wanted?

The fugitive coughed, his shivering constant now. "All right, stop," he said abruptly. "Take off your pack and set it on that rock there. Nice and slow."

Gus complied, aware of the Smith & Wesson pointed at him. The fugitive's hands had to be stiff from the cold, his fingers wet and slippery. If he just dropped the gun, fine. But Gus didn't want him accidentally firing off a round.

"Unzip the main compartment and dump out the contents," the fugitive said. "Again, nice and slow. Don't do anything stupid. I want to see what you've got in there."

Gus did as instructed, shaking out three energy bars, a water bottle, an emergency whistle, waterproof matches, dry clothes, a compass, trash bags that could be used as an emergency shelter.

The fugitive toed a trash bag with his wet sneaker. "That's a lot to carry for a day hike, isn't it?"

Gus shook his head. "I always pack more than I think I'll need. If I use everything, I know I didn't pack enough."

"Where's your gun?"

"Not here."

"You're a federal agent. You go armed 24/7. You're supposed to have a gun."

Gus didn't know if that was true or not. He and Nate had never discussed those kinds of details. The fugitive had frisked him for weapons in the first minutes after he'd jumped out from behind the boulder, but Gus hadn't realized it was, at least in part, due to mistaken identity. "Why didn't you check my pack for a gun sooner?" he asked.

"I didn't need to. Touch it, and you were dead, anyway. Let you carry the extra weight of a gun."

His logic made sense. "Do you want to change into dry socks at least?"

"No. Give me your water."

Before Gus could comply, the fugitive reached down with his free hand and grabbed the plastic bottle from among the dumped-out contents. He used his teeth to open the flip-top and drank deeply, even with his chattering teeth.

He shoved the bottle at Gus. "Close it. Don't drink any."

Once again, Gus did as requested.

"You're older than I thought you'd be," the fugitive said. "What's with the white hair?"

"Hard life."

"I hate marshals."

Gas said nothing.

"How much farther now?" the fugitive asked.

"To—"

"To where your mummy and daddy froze to death."

Gus pushed back a surge of anger and gazed down toward the village nestled in the valley below Cold Ridge, lost now in the gray clouds and fog. He could see his nephew and nieces on that cold, awful night thirty years ago.

Nate, seven. Antonia, five. Carine, three.

Waiting.

“They got caught in an unexpected ice storm. It was all over the papers.” The fugitive sounded amused now. “Can you imagine? A young couple with three little kids, freezing to death up here.”

Gus rose up straight. He’d been twenty and newly home from war. He’d looked at the faces of his young nephew and nieces and wished he could have died up on the ridge in the place of his brother and his wife. Instead, he’d become the guardian to their three orphans.

They were all married now. Antonia and Carine had little ones of their own. Nate and his wife, Sarah, were expecting their first child in a few weeks. A boy.

If he died up here today, Gus thought, the little ones—like grandchildren to him—wouldn’t remember him. They weren’t old enough.

There was some consolation in that.

The wind picked up and swirled the gray horizon, creating a wavelike effect that had a tendency to disorient, even nauseate, novice hikers. As an outfitter and guide, Gus had encountered hikers of all descriptions in the mountains. Most were eager and well-meaning, determined to enjoy their experience while taking proper precautions.

The fugitive poked his gun into Gus’s back. “Well? Answer me. How much farther?”

“Fifty yards. Maybe a little more. We need to be careful in the fog. We don’t want to walk off the edge of a cliff.” He glanced back, slowing his pace. “You don’t need your gun. I’ll take you wherever you want to go. I won’t run or mislead you. I don’t want you to hurt anyone else.”

“I want your coat,” the fugitive said suddenly. “Get it off.”

Gus paused and shrugged off his pack and coat. The fugitive took it with one hand and put it on over his wet sweater, taking care to keep his gun at the ready.

He zipped up the coat and gave a shudder of obvious relief. “I don’t know why I waited this long.”

“Because you underestimated how cold you’d get. It happens all the time.” Gus noticed raindrops already collecting on his navy sweater, but its thick wool was a better insulator when wet than the fugitive’s cotton. “What’s your name?”

“Fred.”

It wasn’t his name. “What are you looking for up here, Fred?”

The fugitive didn’t answer. His shivering had lessened, but it wasn’t necessarily a good sign. He motioned with his gun, still clenched in his half-frozen hand, and Gus started back along the trail.

The fog wasn’t going to lift. The wind wasn’t going to let up.

The rain wasn’t going to stop.

“Let’s get to where you want to go,” he said wearily.

They came to the spot where his brother and sister-in-law had died. He’d been a firefighter. She’d been a biology teacher. These days, weather reports were more accurate, but even so, people died on Cold Ridge.

“There’s a rock formation just past where your folks died. It looks like a toaster.”

The fugitive’s words were slightly slurred, but he continued. “Do you know it?”

“I do.”

Gus stared into the shifting fog and clouds. He could walk right past the toaster-shaped rock formation, and the fugitive would probably never know it. Then what? Shoot Gus in the back? Drop dead from the cold? But as he continued along the trail, his legs heavier now, the pack grinding into the small of his back, Gus knew he wouldn't mislead his captor. He'd just take him where he wanted to go.

The wind was steady, at least fifty miles per hour with higher gusts. He had hiked up all forty-eight peaks in the White Mountains over four thousand feet, and he'd experienced hurricane-force winds. But nothing had prepared him for the jumble of emotions he felt at being here—on the ground where his brother and the woman he'd loved had died.

His brother had taken him up this same trail before Gus had left for basic training.

"Be safe, Gus. I'll be here when you come home."

He pushed back the memory and nodded to a rock outcropping just ahead, barely visible through the shifting gray. "There. That's it. It looks just like a toaster."

The fugitive stepped up next to Gus and pulled the coat's hood over his head. It would help break the wind but otherwise wouldn't do much good. His hair was wet.

He wasn't shivering at all anymore.

"Pal," Gus said, "listen to me. You need to get warm. Let me help you. You don't want to die up here, do you?"

He waved the gun, still clenched tight in his right hand. "Behind the rocks. Go."

Gus sighed and made his way off the trail, the wind going through his layers, the rain soaking his layers. He pushed through scrubby balsams clinging to the thin soil and climbed over a tumble of boulders to the granite formation. It jutted ten feet out of the ground below a rounded knoll.

The fugitive panted, stumbling on the boulders as he followed Gus behind the outcropping. They were out of the wind now, at least.

"I knew I'd make it back here," the fugitive said.

Gus could hear the wind whipping through the valley, up onto the open ridge. He shivered. He preferred to keep moving.

But he followed the fugitive's gaze to a mound of dirt and rock between the base of the rock formation and the knoll.

A shallow grave.

"Who's buried there?" Gus asked.

"Smuggler. He tried to cheat the wrong man."

"Meaning you."

The fugitive didn't answer, his eyes gleaming with excitement as, with a burst of fresh energy, he got onto his knees. The rain let up now, too, and he set the Smith & Wesson next to his right knee and started moving baseball-size rocks with his red, frozen hands.

"You've stopped shivering, but it's not because you're warm," Gus said. "Your core temperature has dropped to the point that your body is focused just on keeping your vital organs working."

"I know what I'm doing."

“Do you? You’re slurring your words. As hypothermia worsens, you get more and more confused. Your mental state—”

“Shut up.” The fugitive glared up at Gus. “I’m digging for gold.”

Was he digging for gold, or was he hallucinating? Despite his slurred speech, he sounded perfectly lucid. He continued to grab rocks and toss them aside, keeping his gun close by as he worked.

Gus stood back. He became aware of another presence up on the knoll in the wind and gray. His teeth were chattering now. His hands were shaking. He wasn’t sure if he could trust his senses. Was he so far gone with hypothermia himself that he was imagining things?

“My coat’s not enough. You’re wet,” he said. “I’ve rescued a lot of people off the ridge who were in better shape than you are now.”

The fugitive looked up at him. His eyes were still, focused, even as he struggled to speak. “You’re not the marshal.”

Gus shrugged. “Never said I was.”

He kicked the fugitive’s pile of wet rocks, creating a distraction, and a man swooped down from the knoll.

Nate.

He leveled a gun at the fugitive.

“Hands in the air. Now.”

“Do it,” Gus told the fugitive. “Don’t make him use deadly force.”

The fugitive raised his hands, and Gus grabbed the Smith & Wesson.

He thought he saw a flicker of fear in the fugitive’s eyes and shook his head. “I’m not going to shoot you,” he said, handing the gun to his nephew. “The situation doesn’t call for deadly force. Not anymore.”

Two more men appeared behind the rock outcropping. Antonia’s husband, a U.S. senator and former rescue helicopter pilot, and Carine’s husband, an airforce para-rescueman. They, too, were armed.

Then came Antonia, a physician, and Carine, a nature photographer who knew the White Mountains at least as well as Gus did. Maybe better.

He hadn’t imagined them.

“We weren’t going back down the mountain without you,” Nate said, his voice catching. “I wasn’t losing you before my baby boy gets to know you.”

Gus sank against the wet rock wall. “I’m worn-out,” he said, “and I’m cold.”

Nate nodded to the fugitive. “What did he want?”

“Gold.”

“And a dead marshal. You didn’t tell him he had the wrong guy?”

“You weren’t the right guy, either.”

A search-and-rescue team arrived with stretchers and made Gus get on one, but he climbed off after a hundred yards and walked the rest of the way down off the ridge.

It was dark and cold, the sky clear, when Gus and his nephew and nieces and their spouses and little ones gathered at the Cold Ridge lakeside home of a federal judge. Her name was Bernadette Peacham, and Gus had known her since kindergarten. She hardly spoke as he helped her get a pile of blankets from the shed and spread them out on a tarp laid on the wet ground in front of her big

outdoor stone fireplace. A fire was roaring. There were marshmallows and hot cocoa.

Beanie, as Gus had called Bernadette for decades, dried off an old Adirondack chair. "You could have died up there," she said as she plopped down. "If Nate hadn't spotted your trail... I don't want to think about it."

"All's well that ends well."

The fugitive's name was Frank Leonard. Two years ago, Nate had recognized him at a hardware store in the village of Cold Ridge. His mug shot was on the USMS Web site, and Nate had a good memory for faces. Leonard was wanted for failing to appear in court on a federal drug charge, and running in to Nate was especially bad timing for him—he'd just killed a fellow smuggler up on the ridge. They'd met there to divide the gold bars they'd received as payment for smuggling drugs and arms over the Canadian border.

Picking the toaster-looking rock formation near the spot where Nate's parents had died had been Leonard's idea. On the way down the ridge, restrained in his stretcher, he'd told Gus that even then he didn't like marshals. "They'd been after me for weeks. They never let up. I thought it was funny, picking that spot."

Funny.

He and his partner in smuggling argued, and Leonard killed him and buried him as best he could, then hiked back down the ridge to clean up loose ends. The gold bars were heavy and awkward, and he wanted to get his ducks in a row before he went back on the ridge, fetched the gold and disappeared, a rich man.

Only Nate had discovered him first.

When he escaped from prison two days ago, he headed straight to Cold Ridge, but he couldn't remember how to get back to the spot where he'd buried his colleague and the gold.

And he wanted revenge against the marshal who'd recognized him. He couldn't believe his luck when he spotted Gus on the trail and mistook him for Nate.

Bernadette picked up a long, sharp-ended stick as Gus settled into the chair next to her. For a while, he'd wondered if he'd ever get warm again. But he was downright hot now, the flames licking up in the black sky.

"Why did you go off on your own this morning?" Bernadette asked.

"I had something on my mind. Beanie, these guys..." He motioned toward Nate, Antonia, Carine, their spouses, their children. "They're my world."

"I know, Gus. You've been there for them all these years. It was good that they could be there for you today."

"I'd have nailed that bastard one way or the other, but I was pretty cold. And that's not what I'm talking about right now." Gus turned to her, the flames flickering in her eyes. "Beanie, we've known each other a long time, you and I, and I haven't had a romantic thought about you, ever."

She gave a shocked little cough. "Thanks a lot."

"Until lately. Now I can't stop thinking about you."

"So you went up that trail this morning to get me out of your mind?"

"No. To figure out how to ask you to marry me."

"Ah." She picked up a stick and stabbed a fat marshmallow onto the end of it. "You asked me to marry you when we were in the first grade. Remember?"

Actually, he didn't. "What did you say?"

“I told you to go soak your head.” She smiled and handed him her stick with the marshmallow. “You’re my hero, Gus. You always have been. It’s just taken us a few decades to figure out we belong together.”

“I’m taking that as a yes.”

Bernadette laughed, and Gus leaned forward and dipped the marshmallow in the flames. He was warm in front of the fire with his family and the woman he loved, and life was good.
