

# ON THE DIVIDE

*Iver Arnegard*

At a bar in Cañon City I felt something behind me and turned to see her. Almost six feet tall. Long, wavy hair. I locked onto her eyes. Blue with wispy flecks of green that swirled like galaxies.

Can I help you?

Her anger shocked me.

What are you staring at? She looked over my shoulder. Jack, I'm here to pay my tab. The woman pulled out a ten and told him to keep the change.

Wait, I said as she turned to leave. I didn't mean to stare. I followed her to the front door. When she opened it, I grabbed her shoulder and she turned.

At least tell me your name.

She smiled for the first time. Full lips curving around flawless, white teeth. No, she said. You got to earn it. And with that she was gone.

The sun was glaring outside. I watched her turn a corner around a brick mercantile and it was almost as if she disappeared into the light itself.

I walked back inside to my barstool. Jack, the bartender, was a buddy of mine who'd just moved to Cañon after buying the Tumbleweed. I'd driven out from Pueblo to see the new place.

Who was that?

I don't know. She was in here a month ago. I let her start a tab. The guys vouched for her. Said she always pays. Eventually.

Well, where does she live?

Not sure. Up in the mountains somewhere.

You don't know where she lives?

Nope.

I took a drink and traced the swirling grains in the wooden bar top. Well, what's her name?

Don't know.

You let her start a tab without catching her name?

She wouldn't tell me. No one knows her name. Pays for everything with cash. *Sells* everything for cash.

What?

Jack shrugged.

I sighed. Well, she aint too hard on the eyes, is she?

He smiled.

Don't you think?

I try *not* to think. Bout women like her anyway. Wife and kids and all. Maybe someday you'll understand.

I didn't really, but I wanted to. Instead, I just laughed.

Jack started complaining about how nothing was good enough for his wife, but I wasn't listening anymore. My thoughts had just run out the door, up to the mountains somewhere, chasing her shadow through the woods.

It was months before I'd see her again. I had a day off work so I'd driven out to the sand dunes everyone talked about since I'd moved to Pueblo. They sat on the other side of the Sangre De Cristos, about three hours away. Four in my rusted out Chevy. Sixty miles of high desert—sagebrush and walking stick—to get down to Walsenburg where I headed west, over La Veta Pass, which split the Sangres and wound back down to the San Luis Valley. Flat as a board but 8,000 feet high and surrounded by jagged peaks almost twice that height. At the valley floor I turned north, hugging the west side of the mountains. Not another traveler in sight and it wasn't long before I spotted the dunes. Amazing. Like the way I imagined Arabia. Or Egypt. But it was more like something from a dream. Piles of sand a thousand feet high, stretching to the north and west as far as I could see. Behind them, the jagged peaks of the Sangres, like broken teeth, dusted with snow and twisting up into clouds.

I parked as close as I could, at the end of a dirt track. Stuffed some jerky and my canteen into my backpack, threw it over my shoulder and set out. The dunes got steep fast and it wasn't long before I was sucking wind, coughing up all the smoke I had to breathe every day back down at the mill. It took an hour to get to the top and when I crested the final ridge, she was there.

As if she'd been waiting for me.

I knew that woman. I just couldn't think where. And then it hit me. But she'd hardly seemed to notice. Didn't bother turning her head. Just kept staring across the valley.

Hey, it's you.

She turned, but avoided my eyes. Huh?

Tumbleweed Bar. In Cañon. I met you there last fall.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah, my buddy Jack owns the place.

I hardly ever go. Was probably just paying my tab. I sell firewood in Cañon sometimes.

That what you do for a living?

She smiled and I knew for sure it really *was* her. No doubt in my mind. I do a lot of things, she said.

Well, where do you live?

You sure are curious.

Look. I'll be straight with you. I never forgot you. And that's rare. Now,

I come all the way out here and see you again in the middle of nowhere. Four months later. What's the chance of me finding you again?

She was still smiling. Pretty slim.

Yeah.

But she just turned away as her grin slipped. Look out here. Her hand traced the ridges beyond the south end of the San Luis Valley. Down there's New Mexico. She pointed to the south. Then turned north. And up there's the Divide. Running forever. Like a spine. Snaking all the way to the Arctic. She smiled again. Country changes quick here in the Borderlands. Where we are now. This all used to be Mexico. Before that, it's where Ute territory met the northeast corner of Navajo country. Where the alpine meets the desert. Borderlands. I've never belonged anywhere. Closest I've come is crossroads like these. Divides.

I looked around. The wind had picked up and was blowing wisps of sand across the slopes.

*This* is where I live, she said.

Here? On these dunes?

In this valley. She peered out across the sand. Down south in that desert. But mostly up on the Divide. I never get too far from the Divide.

I laughed. She was playing games again, but I could be a good sport. All right then. Well, what do you do?

Whatever it takes, she said. And with that she turned and started walking back down the ridge.

I watched her go. Hadn't noticed till then that she was barefoot. That long dress dancing in the wind. In the gusts, her hair lifted and fell from broad shoulders.

Wait, I said, running after her.

She didn't turn around. Just kept walking and it took a good minute before I caught her.

You can't just walk away like that. At least give me your name.

My name? I told you you got to earn that.

More games. But I wasn't giving up. All right, I said. How do I do that?

She paused and looked out over the mountains again. I'll be in Villa Grove in three days. Gotta sell a horse.

A horse?

Yeah. You ride?

I can.

Then I'll bring two extra mares.

Well, where's Villa Grove?

Thirty miles that way. She pointed. North side of the valley.

I looked back down and shook my head. You ever get to Pueblo?

She laughed. Not if I can help it.

Not if you can help it.

That's right, she said. All that matters is out here.

So that's it? That's your offer? That's the only way I earn it?

She finally stopped walking and turned to me. Yes. That's it. But be careful what you wish for. Make sure it's really what you want. And that you can handle it when it comes your way. She met my eyes for the first time and those galaxies started swirling again. Her leathery face. Lined like people who spend their time in the sun. But also youthful. She could've been twenty. Could've been forty. Either way, there was something sweet and dangerous about her that I couldn't walk away from. I just couldn't leave it alone.

She turned and kept moving down the dunes, loose sand collapsing around her feet. But as she grew smaller in the distance she seemed not to be walking. It was something closer to a glide. I didn't chase after her again. Just watched her grow smaller and smaller until she was gone.

I followed Big Horn Sheep Canyon up the Arkansas to Poncha Pass. Heading west out of Pueblo, you had to go north or south to get around the Sangres, an impassable, rugged spine of thirteen and fourteen thousand foot peaks stretching from Salida to Fort Garland, completely cutting off the rest of the world to the east. Four hours later I pulled to a stop at the Villa Grove general store and asked the clerk where the Long X Ranch was. The old woman never said a word. Just turned and pointed through a grimy window where a long dirt road disappeared toward a broken horizon.

When I showed up, the woman from the Tumbleweed was already there, shaking hands with a cowboy and patting a horse on the neck.

That day we followed an old game trail up into the mountains outside Bonanza. My boss had raised hell at the mill for me taking the day off. But I'd lied about a dying relative I had to see and even he wouldn't say no to that.

I hadn't been on a horse in years. I picked it up again quick, but struggled to keep up with her. When we stopped on a high ridge overlooking the valley she told me she could read the clouds. I asked her what she meant and she just smiled, said I wouldn't understand.

There's gonna be a storm tomorrow night in New Mexico. West of Taos. And I plan to be there for it. She half smiled. Tomorrow, she said, I'll close my eyes in the Borderlands.

I have to work tomorrow.

When I go to the desert, I go alone. She kicked her horse and started moving again.

I shook my head and followed. She didn't even turn around.

We rode across that windy, crumbling ridge, down through snow fields and back into the trees. I followed her along a game trail and through a hollow till we reached a tiny cabin. Built into a slope and overhung with trees, I never would've known it was there.



She dismounted at the front of the cabin, tied her horse to a ponderosa, and unlatched the door. I swung down from my mare and followed her in. As she lit a cracked and dusty lantern the place brightened. The smallest cabin I'd seen. Wood stove. Stack of kindling in one corner. Pile of blankets in the other. That was it. Not even a window.

Sit down. She jerked her head toward the blankets as she lifted a latch in the floor and pulled a bundle up from the cellar. Hand me some kindling, she said.

I built a fire in the stove while she unwrapped the elk meat from freezer paper. She laid it on the flat part of the pot belly and the slick crimson glistened in the dancing light.

Who gave you the elk? I said.

She took out a long knife and started slicing between the ribs. No one. I shot it a month ago. Half a mile north.

How'd you get it here?

When she turned to me, the knife winked in the light. Quartered it and slid it downhill to the cabin.

In the flicker of the lantern her eyes seemed cat-like. She turned back to the meat.

So, when did you buy this place? I said.

I didn't. She kept cutting without turning to me. I built it.

You own this land?

She almost laughed, but caught herself. No one owns this land, she said.

I didn't know what she meant, but I dropped it at that. Done asking questions. Instead, I stoked the fire and we cooked the elk over the stove. We ate with our hands and threw the bones outside for hungry coyotes.

After dinner we sat on the blankets in the corner, leaning up against the log wall. I put my hand on her knee and, to my surprise, she let me.

I won't ever leave the mountains, she said without turning. This is not going to end well.

I'll take my chances.

She shook her head. You won't be able to keep up.

You'd be surprised.

She laughed. I spent a few winters up north, she said. Used to hunt moose in the Yukon. Crossed over to Alaska a few times. Even tracked caribou way up in the Arctic. North of the Brooks Range. You should see the moose up there. You wouldn't even come to their shoulders. Fifteen hundred pounds of meat. Racks six feet across. They don't migrate or hibernate. Tough it out all winter. But some don't make it. By the end of the rut the bigger bulls are so beat down from fighting over cows, hardly eating, that they can't make it through the winter. They just limp around, slowly starving, waiting for wolves to pick 'em off.

I grabbed her at the jaw line and turned her to face me. My hand slid further up her thigh. I'm not waiting for wolves, I said.

No. She shook her head. You're running to them.

I can't help it. I leaned in to her and opened her mouth with my lips. The lantern had all but died and in the darkness we slowly stripped each other. I couldn't believe how her muscles rippled across her body. Her legs long and knotted. That perfect wetness in her center. As I entered her, she clawed at my back and sweet pain washed over my scalp. Through her moans her voice changed, climbed octaves to something more animal than human. We'd lost the lantern light completely and as we lay there in the cave-like darkness, a breeze picked up outside blowing wisps of snow dust around the cabin, scraps of ice tapping at the front door. Her head rested between my forearm and chest as I stared into the darkness above, listening to wind polish the cabin logs outside.

So, have I earned it yet? I said.

She breathed in and let out a long exhalation of pleasure. Yeah. You've earned it.

I smiled. So, what is it?

She rolled over and moved on top of me. Kissed my chest, neck, jaw line. Up to my ear. Where she took another breath. And whispered her name.

In the morning we hitched the horses and rode back down to the valley.

I need to see you again. Soon.

Why don't you just stay?

Cause I got this thing called a job. I sighed. People don't live the way you live, you know. It's not normal.

Is that what you want? Normal?

I shook my head. You're crazy. I can't quit my job. I got next weekend off though. What are you doing?

I'll be in Durango next weekend.

Alone?

You can come with me if you want.

I felt my skin tighten. Why are we always doing whatever *you* want to do?

This isn't what I want. You think I like going to town? I have to do this. To make a living. Her left eye started twitching. Something I noticed when she was frustrated.

Well, it's getting a little annoying. I'm always coming to you. We're always off doing something you need to do.

She clenched her jaw then and I braced myself for her rage. For her to say, Forget the whole thing. In a way I wanted her to, so I could tell her how things were. How stupid she was being. And how no one would put up with this shit. Including me.

But instead she turned to the south. A warm breeze had come up and it seemed to soften her.

She took a slow breath. All right, she said. I'll wait for you. Why don't you meet me in Alamosa?

I was shocked. But still mad. What do you mean?

She squeezed her eyes shut. Then they snapped open. We'll go together.

To Durango.

You don't want me there with you.

She looked out over the valley and seemed to take it all in in a glance.

Yes, she said. I want you there with me. She nodded, looking down at the ground.

And next time, we'll do something else. She paused and looked back up at me.

Something *you* want. You decide. Maybe I'll come to Pueblo. How does that sound?

I was still mad as hell, but I wanted to smile.

She was looking right at me now. Still serious, but almost smiling herself.

So I stepped over to her, grabbed her, and brought her lips to mine.

Sounds good. I'll be back next weekend. I looked out over the part of valley she'd been studying. The sun was setting behind the San Juans, sending its rays east to paint the Sangres purple.

I smiled even wider. All right, I said. I'll see you in Alamosa.

I met her at the Hitching Post that Friday and she jumped in my truck after we moved her firewood into the bed. As we drove up Wolf Creek Pass and down through Pagosa I asked about her life, where she'd come from, if she had any family, but she mostly dodged my questions or gave short, vague answers. Instead, she just talked about the hunting grounds we'd be driving near, or the streams she liked to fish in that part of the country. Aspen groves where she'd shot her biggest bucks or bulls. Bends in the San Juan that held the most trout. And the hidden glades where you could pick enough blueberries to last all winter.

When we got to Durango I checked us into the Rabbit Ears motel, the only dump I could afford, and at the time, she didn't seem to mind the chipped night stand or the plastic flowers on top. We didn't notice much of anything, making love for hours, her nails, like claws, raking over my back till dawn.

In the morning, we met a guy named Levi at the rodeo grounds, picked up a new saddle, and off loaded the firewood she was trading for it.

Wanna get some breakfast? I said when we climbed back into the truck.

No, I don't have much of an appetite.

Well, we could take a walk downtown. See what kind of restaurants they got. Find a steakhouse tonight. Maybe go out dancing later on.

No, she said. Her voice flat. We need to get out of here.

Come on. We're in Durango.

I need to get back, she said. And that was it. The tone of her voice left no room for discussion, so I sighed, slipped it into gear, and let out the clutch.

We hardly talked the three hours back to Alamosa. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong. Just stared out at the mountains as I searched the dial for radio

stations.

We spent the night back up at her cabin. In the morning, when it was time for me to leave, I turned to her. Sorry you didn't want to stay in Durango, I said. I just thought it would be fun.

It's not that. She sighed. You just don't get it. I can't be in town. Not for too long. I can't breathe down there. It makes me sick. I have to be up here. And if you really want to be with me, you need to be here, too. No more pretending. No plastic flowers. We have to be *here*.

Look, I can't quit my job. Not now.

Well, I can't leave the mountains.

Let's talk about this next weekend. When do I see you again?

There's a full moon next weekend.

So?

So it's probably best if we don't see each other.

Why, what happens on a full moon?

I go up to the Divide.

Well, I'll go with you.

It's not a good idea. You'll just get hurt. Maybe you should stay away for a while.

What's gotten into you?

You wouldn't be able to handle it.

Handle what?

Skiing in the dark.

This time I laughed. If there was one thing I *could* handle...

I'd moved to Pueblo from the North Cascades. Eagle Rock, Washington, where Dad had strapped boards on my feet before I could walk. Learned the old style, too. On Grandpa's skis he'd brought from Norway. I grew up lumberjacking and skiing. That's all I knew. Till the timber jobs disappeared when the market went bust. After that I'd heard this mill in Pueblo was hiring. Supposed to be the Pittsburgh of the West. Enough steel to last a century. Nothing I'd done before but it sounded better than bread lines. So I packed my life into my pickup and headed to Colorado.

She turned back to me. I'll be on the top of Monarch Pass at sunset, but I suggest you stay away.

Not a chance, I said. And smiled. I'll be there.

She was already at the trailhead when I showed up, even though the sun had another hour in the sky. When she saw me she just shook her head, hitching up her mare.

I brought you some snowshoes and skis, she said. Didn't think you'd make it though.

I have both, I said. But thanks.



We started snowshoeing before sundown. By the time we carved through the thick timber to the higher glades, dusk was coming on strong and the moon was just slipping past the higher peaks. I could barely keep up with her, but I didn't let myself stop no matter how much my legs and lungs burned. And she knew. I'm sure of it. Could hear me sucking wind behind her but only glanced back from time to time to smile at me.

You okay back there? She'd turn again toward the alpine and move faster, gliding on top of the snow as if she weren't touching it at all.

Every time we came to a crest I was sure we'd topped out, then another ridge would appear higher up. We'd already climbed for what seemed like forever and the mountains were never-ending. Hours later the full moon shone overhead when we finally reached the top. An outcropping of snow and rock where she stopped and turned to me.

This is it, she said. I was panting too hard to speak. The Divide.

I gazed around us. The moon washed everything in an eerie blue light, but I could see the lesser ridges unfolding on both sides. And that rocky spine stretching forever from north to south. The Continental Divide where everything had to fall to one side or the other. Where all the snow, when it melted, would run downhill, carving out canyons and valleys, stretching low and far across prairies and deserts till it reached the ocean. The Atlantic off to the right. The Pacific on the left.

Home, she said. I don't belong on either side. Only here. She was already unstrapping her skis from her pack and pulling off her snowshoes.

Where are we going from here? I was still breathing heavy but at least I could talk.

The West Slope, she said, peering down.

I followed her eyes down that wide, open bowl of untouched powder to where the terrain disappeared in the blue light, melting into trees. Then I turned back to her. In the moonlight she didn't look of this world. More a part of the night sky. Or something else. Animal maybe. I couldn't pin it down. Those cat eyes. How her feet didn't seem to ever touch the ground. And I wondered what she was tempting out here. Or what was tempting her.

My place is a few miles down that way, she said.

You have another place?

I have places all over. Follow me. She dug her poles in.

Wait, you're going right now?

Yeah. If you don't want to, you know how to get back down the way we came.

I paused and studied the slope. Is this the only way?

Only way *I* go. She bent her knees and pushed her poles further into the snow. Just try to keep up. She smiled. And with that she was gone.

I took a deep breath and followed. I hadn't been on skis in years and the

powder was the deepest I'd seen, but I leaned back hard, let my tips climb through the surface till I was riding on top.

Powder billowed around me. I was in and out of a cloud, catching glimpses of her silhouette below, farther down the slope than I could imagine possible. She glided on top, carving the snow effortlessly. A true artist. The wind carried her voice up to me and when I heard her laugh echo across the peaks I let out a cry of joy. But it was lost in the wind. And that mountain got steep quick. Racing down the west side of the Divide, steeper and steeper with each turn till I was plummeting, the grade hardly enough to stop a total free fall. I'd feel myself leave the ground and panic. Cascading through a cloud of snow, then the mountain would catch me again.

She pulled farther and farther ahead now as we neared tree line. The tops of firs sticking up through dozens of feet of snow. Then we were back in the glades with plenty of room to maneuver, though I knew the heavy timber would show up fast and this kind of speed could be deadly.

Clouds were drifting in across the moon, the sky darkening when she disappeared over a ledge and I found myself turning hard, trying to stop against all that velocity and inertia. But that slope was too sheer and I had way too much speed till the last second when powder sprayed from my skis out over a fifty foot drop. A cloud that could've been me falling silently through darkness. She had jumped it somehow and was still gliding down the range through an alpine meadow below. Fifty feet of rock and air hadn't even slowed her. It wasn't possible. I'd known the best skiers in the world and none of them could've touched her.

I tried to ignore the fear as I shook my head and pushed off again. Not jumping like she had. But picking my way carefully down chutes, between lethal rock croppings. Below, she was headed for another drop off. Flying down the slope. This time I saw her launch off a cornice and disappear into darkness.

I took a deep breath of thin air. My heart pounding against my rib cage. If she could do it... I picked up more speed dropping down toward the ledge. Not turning anymore. Just heading straight for it. When I hit the cornice I felt that weightlessness. Airborne, cliffs opening up below me and the mountain coming up fast. There'd been no time to pick a landing but I touched down again on an open snowfield and tried to regain control.

Where the hell had she landed? There were no tracks. Then I hit something. A stump maybe, and started wavering. This time I couldn't straighten. I was spun out. I tried to turn hard, but couldn't keep my tips together.

Clouds totally covered the moon by then and that next ledge came as a surprise. I spun off it sideways. The last thing I saw were those rocks coming up at me and there was nothing to do about it.

To this day I don't remember the impact.

When I opened my eyes to moonlight and darkness I couldn't breathe. I gasped for air, and each time that hot pain shot through my chest as I dangled

on either side of that rock from a cracked set of ribs. I remember staring up at the Dipper, praying to die quick.

Then everything went black.

I thought I was dreaming as she came into focus. Washing a cloth in a basin to place on my forehead.

She glared at me. Shook her head and went back to feeding the stove. I lay in a huge wash basin. In a different cabin. Bigger, for one thing. Then I remembered the fall. Those rocks. And knew it was no dream. I wiggled my toes and feet. Bent my legs to make sure I could still move. I couldn't turn my neck for all the pain.

You're a fool, she said, lifting the rag from my head and taking it back to the stove. I told you not to follow me. I shouldn't have let you come.

As I coughed, flames shot across my chest.

You're lucky to be alive. She was stirring something on the stove.

Oh, my God... But even talking hurt.

Just lay back, she said, walking the pot over from the stove. She started pouring a dark liquid into my bath. Stupid man, she said.

What is that? My voice a whisper.

It'll heal you. I got it all from the mountain. Might take some time, but you'll at least be able to walk out of here tomorrow.

When she finished pouring it all out, she shook her head again. Stupid.

But I was already drifting off. As the medicine started working, I closed my eyes and slipped back into darkness.

By the end of the next day I was up and walking around the cabin. Feeling better than I thought I would've been for months to come. Almost totally healed. But exhausted. After a short hike, where she showed me the path back to the trailhead, I spent most of the afternoon sleeping and went to bed early that night.

The next day was Sunday. When I opened my eyes that morning, she was carrying a pile of firewood into the cabin.

I got out of bed, helped her stack the wood, and put my arms around her.

She turned and smiled faintly. Feeling better?

I am.

Good. She glanced down at the floor, took a deep breath, and looked back up at me. I'm heading north in a week.

Where?

The Brooks Range. I've decided I want to be there when the caribou come back. Hunt those great herds one last time.

You've decided... When did you decide this? I could feel the blood rushing to my face.

I've been thinking about it for a while. She looked back down at the floor.



I shook my head. You are too much for me. Alaska... How long will you be gone?

I don't know. But I'll be back.

So, you're just taking off?

I said I'll be back. Or. She paused and her right eye started twitching. You could come with me.

I looked through the cabin's one window of old, lopsided glass that distorted everything. Outside, the fir trees took on strange, cartoonish shapes and I felt dizzy. But the nausea was soon eclipsed by rage.

I told you I can't quit my job. What would we live on?

We'd be all right. What would you need money for?

What would I need money for, I mocked.

Nothing up there. We'd be fine. But don't make a decision now. Just think about it. I'll be around for another week.

She tried to take my hands in hers, but I pushed her away.

Another week? I yelled. And then what?

She crossed her arms and glared at me. Then I leave.

With or without me?

I'm not going to apologize. I need *real* wilderness. Colorado's a great place to winter but I need more. She stood rigid, arms still crossed. I wanted her to suffer. To feel the hurt I felt. Like dying from the inside out.

But I was too mad to speak.

I have to follow my path, she said. If I stayed with you—especially in town—I'd grow bitter at best. I want to be with you, but I'd be miserable.

You don't want to be with me, I said, although I knew she did. And you should go to Alaska. Leave now. Why wait a week? I grabbed my coat from the counter and pushed my arms through the sleeves. Storming over to the door, I stepped into my boots and turned back. It hurt me to see tears rimming her eyes, but I couldn't stop myself. I'm not going with you, I said. Have fun up there. Have a nice life. And with that I slammed out of the cabin. Never even stopped to look back.

All the way to the trailhead I never turned, though I wished she'd run after me and take it all back. Or at least let me change my mind about it. But I sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to apologize. She'd hurt my pride for the last time.

Still, even as I drove back to Pueblo that day, I was starting to soften. Starting to wish I could take back all that I'd said to her. Wishing I hadn't left her cabin in a rage like that.

As I lay awake in my bed that night, tossing and turning till dawn, I was starting to realize I *didn't* need my job. My house. Or my pickup. I'd never wanted to live in Pueblo anyway. A nice town full of great people, but I'd always missed the mountains. And all I wanted anymore was to be with her.



As the realization sunk in, dawn seeped through my bedroom window, and I grew overwhelmed with joy. Couldn't wait to tell her what I'd decided. And as I put on my work clothes that morning, and slid behind the wheel of my truck, I knew what I had to do.

You're quitting? my boss said.

Yeah.

For what? You find another job?

No. I'm moving.

What about your mortgage?

I shrugged.

What about your house?

The bank can have it.

Well, I can't pay you anything more if you just walk off site. No notice or nothin.

That's all right, I said. And grinned. Thanks for everything.

Back at home I packed my truck and headed west. I stopped briefly in Cañon City to say goodbye to Jack, then continued up the road, through Bighorn Sheep Canyon, following the river as she wound up toward the Divide.

From Monarch Pass, I snowshoed the two miles toward the cabin. I couldn't wait to see her. So glad to be free of that mill. For the first time in my life I had a feeling everything would be fine.

But when I turned the last corner, her horse wasn't hitched to the tree. I walked to the door and pushed it open.

I'm here. I quit my job.

But the cabin was empty. At first I thought she was probably out getting wood or berries, so I settled into the place.

But that night she didn't come back.

Or the next. Or the night after that.

As days went by, I didn't know what to feel. Anger sometimes grew into rage. I'd throw things. Smash dishes. Then more confusion. Sometimes I'd think of ways to hurt myself. Then I'd be numb for a while. Then confused again. Where the hell was she? Why hadn't she waited?

Weeks went by. Then months.

When the first snow flew, I moved down to Salida. Rented a house from some man named Miller and began to accept the idea that she wasn't coming back any time soon. Part of me knew she was on the only path she could follow now. She had things to figure out and, surprisingly, all I really wanted was for her to be safe.

I had a feeling she was.

That winter I opened a carpentry shop and drew customers right away. It turned out to be more than enough to pay my bills. Eventually enough to send for my old man back in Eagle Rock. Move him in with me. Years later I still hadn't

married, but learned to be happy alone, taking care of Dad. Staying up at the cabin for elk season. Exploring all that wild country.

I still snowshoed back up to the Divide.

Sometimes in the moonlight out there, when I raced down those slopes I could swear I caught a glimpse of her, up in those higher pinnacles—the spine that splits the continent. The peaks of that divide. Dangerous, powerful, and sacred.

Even now I sometimes see her crisscrossing that ridge, riding the line where everything must fall to one side or the other.