



Stalker

by Kathleen O'Neal Gear

Beartooth Mountains, Montana, 1918

As I dismount and tie Jethro to the hitching post, the howling of wolves echoes around the mountains. It's a strange haunting sound, beautiful beyond human understanding. Patting Jethro on the neck, I say, "Won't be more than a few minutes."

The horse blinks and exhales. He knows the routine. It's always the same. We ride down from the ranch, buy supplies at the mercantile store, then head to the post office before riding back up the mountain. Might be a bit more complicated today. The highest peaks are shrouded with snow clouds, and the gusting wind has a bite to it.

Flipping up my collar, I step onto the wooden porch.

"How you doing, Mattie?" Jim Bailey calls from across the street.

I turn to look at him. He's leading his horse. A rolled-up deer hide is tied behind his saddle. "All right, Jim. You?"

"Good enough, I guess. If you need any help pushing the cows down from the high country, you call me. I'll round up my boys, we'll be there lickety-split. Snow's coming early this year, I think."

"Already got 'em down, Jim, but if you come up next week, I could use a hand weaning calves."

"Be there on Tuesday, if that works for you."

I lift a hand to him. "Sure does. Thanks. Say hello to Marge for me."

"Will do."

Pulling my battered cowboy hat down, I lean into the wind, shove open the mercantile's door, and enter a warm glow. The fireplace in the back crackles, casting orange light over the almost empty shelves. I need flour, if they have any. Not many places do these days.

Just before I pull the door closed, a single wolf lets out

a long drawn-out wail that rides the gusts up and down the valley.

"Morning, Mattie," SallyAnn greets from where she's stocking milk bottles in the ice box.

"Morning."

I walk for the flour aisle and think about the wolves. Their numbers are decreasing. Montana has been waging war on wolves for over twenty years. Still, a day never goes by without me seeing one or two trotting across the ranch yard.

I don't hate them like other folks do. My father killed a wolf on our ranch when I was four. Our family survived by selling calves, and the wolf had killed a bull calf, which earned her a death sentence. I grew up with that wolf, its soft fur as comforting to me as that of our beloved border collies. Most of my childhood consisted of sneaking around the house with the wolfskin draped over my head, growling, and terrorizing the cat. I named the skin Stalker. The wolfskin, I believed, gave me the power to see through the wolf's eyes. Maybe it was a child's imagination, but I've always felt that part of Stalker's soul seeped into me making me braver and stronger. She's still there, breathing right below my heart. When I'm frightened or lonely, I retreat inside to find Stalker.

"SallyAnn, you've only got small sacks of flour out here. I need twenty pounds."

I hear two people talking in another aisle. I can't see them, but they have curious accents.

SallyAnn comes around the aisle drying her hands on her stained blue apron. "Sorry, Mattie. I been splitting up the big sacks trying to make sure folks at least get a little for their bread-making. If you really need it, I'll put together twenty pounds for you."

I pull one of the small sacks off the shelf. Weighs maybe two pounds. "No, this'll be fine. I don't want somebody's child to go hungry on account of me."

SallyAnn smiles. "You heard from your younger brother?"

"Not since August." The words build an ache in my

chest. There's only me and Josh now. It's hard running the ranch by myself, but he felt it was his duty to go fight the German Empire.

"Well, maybe you'll find a letter in the post office today."

"Hope so."

I cradle my sack of flour and head for the register.

The October I turned twelve, my father started taking Josh out to hunt. When the first elk bugles drifted down from the mountains, they packed up their rifles and ammunition, loaded up the horses, and set out for the magnificent high country. I longed to be on those hunts with them, to spend my days tiptoeing through the black timber with my rifle in my arms. While they were gone, I sat in front of the window, hunting with them in my mind. I could taste the cold air as I moved through the forest shadows, searching for movement or a tan patch of color hidden in the weave of tree trunks. I was taking perfect aim, gently squeezing the trigger, and hearing the animal fall, then leading the horse up to pack out that beautiful creature that would feed our family for six months. Hunting was a holy act. Each bite of venison was like communion. My father always insisted that we ask the animal's forgiveness and thank it for its life before we picked up our forks. It was our sacred duty.

I ponder that.

Josh is off fulfilling another kind of sacred duty. I pray he's the best predator in the forest.

I'm always puzzled by people who think civilization has domesticated us, torn out our teeth and turned us docile. What a lie. Humans are predators. That's how we've survived. We create weapons that allow us to kill better, more efficiently, but ultimately success depends upon the hunter's ability to enter the mind of the prey. That requires accessing an ancient kinship that, I believe, lives in our blood and muscles. Hunter and hunted are always there, buried deep inside us. The prey flees; the predator stalks. Both are linked in a dance of death that provides life. Every animal knows this. Coyotes hunt voles beneath the snow in winter. Bobcats hunt turkeys. Bears claw apart old logs to get to grubs. The killer is necessary.

Especially in a war. Josh is hunting a different animal, but hunting just the same.

Jim Bailey walks into the store and disappears around an aisle. When I next see him, he's carrying a bag of salt. I call, "That for the deer hide I saw behind your saddle?"

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He smiles. "Yep. Shot the buck this morning. Can't wait to get home. Marge is frying fresh steaks for dinner."

A woman I don't know emerges from another aisle and gapes at him in apparent horror. She's wearing a mink coat and has her hair piled high on top of her head. Obviously, not from around these parts. "You murdered an innocent deer? You're in a store for God's sake. Why can't you buy your food?"

George gives her a tight smile and carries his salt to the cash register, while I try to fathom her accent. Back East somewhere, I guess.

The woman shakes her head, glowers at Jim, and says something unpleasant to the short man beside her.

My eyes narrow. I call, "Hey, nice coat. Did you head-shoot those weasels or trap them? I prefer the head shot, personally."

The woman's mouth drops open, and she hurries her companion out of the store.

When they're gone, I turn around and find SallyAnn watching me.

"Sorry I chased off your customers."

"Don't fret it. Didn't like 'em anyway."

I suppose it's because I'm a ranch girl, but her comment about buying meat in a store rankled. Buying meat has stripped humans of the wild within; it's killed all kinship with animals. I'm sure it would never occur to her to ask forgiveness before she picked up her fork. Because, after all, the steak isn't really an animal. It's just a piece of meat. Her fur coat was never alive. It's just fur.

The wolf who lives inside me does not understand.

I pay for my flour. "Thanks, SallyAnn."

After I've packed the flour in my saddle bag and stroked Jethro's neck, I mount-up and ride down the street for the tiny post office. I can't describe the unbearable joy and relief I feel at finding a letter from my brother. Mom and Dad are long gone. Josh is all I have.

When I walk out of the post office, the mountains have vanished, and snow falls in a light windblown haze. I'll wait until I get back to the ranch before I open the letter. I want to savor every word in the light of a warm fire. No matter what he tells me, I can stand it if I'm home in my old rocking chair.

Reining Jethro around two little boys playing in the dirt road, I kick him into a lope. The ranch is an hour away at a steady walk, but with the snow, and my letter, I want to get home.

As we ascend the trail up into the mountains, I think about my Dad. He refused to take me hunting. He told me girls did not hunt, that I had other obligations—to cook and sew. To become a wife and mother. It felt like a betrayal. When I turned eighteen, I took my horse and rifle and headed for the high country. I needed to understand life, and that meant I had to teach myself how to survive in a world of elk, deer, and grizzly bears. I hunted. Learning took all of my strength and wits. My heart expanded in the freezing air, and my feet felt for every twig that might snap, or rock that could trip me. I found my first elk hiding in the deepest shadows. When the calf turned sideways, I shot, and watched it stumble off. Tiptoeing forward, I found the calf lying on its side with blood spraying from its nostrils. The sight filled me with exultation and deep sadness. I wept and petted the little calf until it died.

I don't think Dad ever understood what it meant to me to be a hunter. At the age of seven, a tattered old wolfskin taught me the reverence of the hunt. I longed to run through the mountains with my tongue lolling, sniffing out the rabbit, digging it from its burrow, and tasting warm blood in my mouth. Only the hunter knows that profound moment when the eyes of prey and predator meet and the truth sinks in... There is only killer and killed. Everything else is illusion.

Josh must be staring that reality in the face in a way I will never understand.

When I finally make it back to the ramshackle old ranch house, the snow has become a blizzard. I lead Jethro to his stall in the barn, brush him down, and toss him hay, then I grab my flour and letter, jam my hat down tight on my head, and trudge for the porch.

Mountain lion tracks mark the snow. Fresh tracks. I study them, seeing where she milled around outside the

house, before hightailing it up into the pines, probably when she saw me riding in. Smart girl. Clever. I respect her for that.

Before I sit down with my letter, I throw kindling atop the coals in the fireplace. Gradually, I add more wood until the flames crackle and snap and firelight flutters over the log walls like amber wings.

At last, I drop into my rocking chair, gently smooth my hand over the precious letter, and take a deep breath. Opening the letter is like taking a sip of holy wine. It's salvation. He's alive.

My eyes drown in every word. It's snowing in France. One of his friends was killed. He's scared. He can't tell me much.

I read the letter four times, and when I can't bear it any longer I set it aside and pull off my boots, placing them by the fire to stay warm. The Battle of Saint-Mihiel must have been brutal. His ears won't stop ringing from the artillery fire. By the time I walk into the bedroom, my eyes are swimming and my heart hurts.

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The wolf is not a trophy. It's a companion. A friend who has guided me through my life. The wolf never lets me forget that wildness lives and breathes inside me, and if I am a good hunter, I'll survive.

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I throw back the old wolfskin and snuggle beneath it. Stalker will be on my bed until I die. When I'm worried, I stroke her tattered fur and it eases my fears. The wolf is not a trophy. It's a companion. A friend who has guided me through my life. The wolf never lets me forget that wildness lives and breathes inside me, and if I am a good hunter, I'll survive.

I think about Josh hiding out in snowy France, trying to stay alive.

Tugging the wolfskin up around my throat, I force myself to close my eyes and seek the wolf inside. Stalker is right there. She's been waiting for me to see her, to remind me that Josh is a good hunter.

He's going to come home.

AUTHOR

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Kathleen O'Neal Gear is one of our Women Writing the West founders. She began writing full-time in 1986 and has authored or co-authored more than fifty novels and has written over two hundred non-fiction publications.

In 2021, Kathleen and her husband, Michael, jointly received the Owen Wister Award for lifetime contributions to Western literature and were inducted into the Western Writers of America Hall of Fame. In 2023, they were awarded the Frank Waters Award for literary excellence, and that same year, Kathleen was inducted into the Colorado Authors Hall of Fame.