

ENTRAPPED

by Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1

He was supposed to meet her here at the crossroads. He hadn't sounded like a man who would be late.

Liv Gardner stepped away from her car parked on the verge of the gravel road and took a careful look around. Not a soul. Not even a building. Just brown fields stubbled with last year's grain stalks – bald Canadian prairie stretching for miles. In the distance, the dark forest. Above it all, blindingly blue sky. And the wind. It never seemed to stop.

Liv turned her face to it to keep her hair from whipping into her eyes. Should she have changed her hair color too, like her clothes and her car and her name? She shivered at the wind's chilly tingle on her skin. Everything here felt foreign – this spring wind so insistent but so empty, carrying no friendly whiffs of burgers, exhaust, perfumes, cigarettes. It came from an uninhabited place. It carried the frigid loneliness of the glacier.

She peered down the road, looking for any sign of Belanger, and suddenly wondered if her sunglasses would betray her. She'd taken care in choosing her clothes. Levis from Wal-Mart. Beige polyester jacket. Cheap sneakers. Even changed her diamond ear studs for silver ones. But

any local in sunglasses definitely wouldn't be wearing three hundred dollar Pradas. She was going to have to watch her step.

She looked up into the vast blue. High up, a bird with broad wings hovered in the wind currents. A hawk? He seemed to be watching her, a predator waiting for her to make a fatal move.

She heard singing, and turned back to the car. Chris had lowered her window, her elbow resting there, and was singing along with a country and western dance tune on the radio, her head back, her feet up on the dash. Liv had to smile. When Chris was happy it radiated from her like she'd swallowed a small sun. Twenty-five years old, but her pixie-pretty face was as bright as a kid with a puppy. Because she's with me, Liv thought with a pang. She has no idea the trouble I'm in.

She gave one last look up and down the crossed gravel roads that stretched out, barren and silent, into the prairie. Belanger was a no-show. She was on her own.

"How far to Spirit Creek?" she said, sliding back behind the wheel.

Chris looked at her eagerly, wanting to please, then quickly down at the map on her lap. "Forty, fifty, sixty," she said.

No, that couldn't be right. "You sure?"

"Goin' like sixty. On route sixty-six."

Liv shook her head. Cars, the animated movie on the hotel TV last night. Why had she bothered asking?

She took the map from Chris and pulled onto the road to head the half-mile back to Highway 43, holding the map in one hand and steering with the other. The town looked about fifteen kilometers north. Gauging distances, Liv still had to do the mental conversion: sixty

miles, a hundred kilometers “Klicks,” the guy at the last gas station had said, pointing a grimy finger at the map.

When she reached the highway she hit the gas and the car strained forward with a grudge. She’d bought it, a gray 1998 Honda Civic, off a lot in Edmonton to finish this last leg of her journey to Peace River country in Northern Alberta. Part of her cover: she needed to arrive in town like a regular Jane Doe. But she missed the sprint power of her Jaguar back in Houston. A present from Mickey, a sleek XL, caramel-colored inside and out. “Matches your hair,” he’d said with a grin, handing her the keys. That was back when she and Mickey and Paul were on a roll. Her stomach tightened. How long until she’d have to sell the Jag, sell her lovely condo? She hadn’t drawn salary in four months. None of them had. The Spirit Creek saboteur had forced them to the brink of bankruptcy.

She sped north on Highway 43 and Chris poked her head out the open window, laughing as the wind ruffled her short dark curls and made slits of her eyes. “Like sixty!”

Liv grabbed an open bag of Humpty Dumpty chips and dug her hand in. Empty.

“I got an apple,” Chris offered.

Ugh. It was real food Liv craved. Comfort food. Two hours ago they’d stopped for lunch at a highway diner, where a chunky native Indian waitress in track pants had served them coffee and then abandoned them to the meager salad bar stocked with trucker-friendly items: slabs of cold cuts, pitchers of chocolate milk, boiled eggs as hard as squash balls. Liv had felt too nervous to do more than pick at the salad. Driving on afterwards, they’d passed a rancher's herd of buffalo. Or was it bison? Whatever, the sight confirmed her unease that she’d entered the Wild Northwest. She saw plenty of oil pumpjacks too in farmers' fields, rising and bending in the continuous rhythm of extraction. “Grasshoppers,” people called them because they looked like

giant insects, feeding. Alberta ran on oil and natural gas. But the gas had stopped flowing in Spirit Creek.

A lumber truck roared past them loaded two stories high with logs, buffeting the little Civic.

“A-G-S-three-two-five,” Chris said, biting into her apple. “Three-two-five’ll skin you alive.”

Liv glanced at her. For hours Chris had done this routine with license plates. Not every passing vehicle got the treatment, maybe two out of six. Once, after she’d ignored a passing Buick, Liv had wondered about her system. “Why not that one?” she’d asked.

“Too spiky.”

Ah, red. Some colors were suspect. All numbers, however, had lives. Liv sighed. She was used to Chris’s fixation on numbers; she just wished it extended to reading a map.

A siren wailed. Liv’s skin prickled as she checked the rearview. A police cruiser was bearing down on them, red strobe lights flashing. Chris glanced back too, then stared straight ahead. Her body went rigid, head pressing back into the head rest, hands balled into fists of fear. Liv knew she was remembering the ambulance. She reached for Chris’s hand and squeezed it. “I’ll handle this.”

She pulled over. The cruiser pulled up behind them. The siren stopped. The lights kept strobing.

In the rearview Liv watched the officer get out and walk toward them. Fit except for a hint of fiftyish flab. A stern face that looked faintly aristocratic. Starched duty uniform of blue and gray, no hat. The wind didn’t ruffle his cropped gray hair.

He reached her window. She lowered it.

“Olivia Gardner?”

“Liv. And while I’m here I’m going by Andrews.”

She could see him trying to match her face with her photo on the company website. Or maybe trying to accept a twenty-nine-year-old as Falcon Energy’s VP and in-house counsel. Liv was just trying to keep her cool. She hadn’t let go of Chris’s stiff hand. “Sergeant Belanger, are the lights really necessary?”

“Anyone sees me talking to you, yes.”

“Could you please turn them off? It’s upsetting my sister.”

He bent and peered in at Chris with a frown. “Sister?”

Before he could say more, Liv got out, took his elbow and escorted him back to his cruiser. On its door was the crown insignia of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

“Lights,” Liv insisted.

There was a flicker of challenge in his eyes, but he leaned in and flipped off the switch, then looked at her, waiting.

Liv stared right back. If anyone needed to do some explaining, he did. He was the one who’d failed. He was the loser who hadn’t been able to make an arrest. But she told herself to drop the anger; if they were going to work together she’d have to cooperate, starting with an account of why she hadn’t come alone. She made it brief. How Chris was at loose ends so she’d brought her along. How they’d only be staying a few weeks anyway, and besides it gave more credibility to her cover. She didn’t mention how her sister saw the world: colors that were shapes, sounds that were lights, fabrics that threatened, numbers that sang. Didn’t add that she’d brought her along because she could no longer afford Chris’s upkeep at the Willows.

Belanger either didn’t get it or didn’t care. “You got the job with the lawyer?”

When she'd first heard his faint Quebec French accent on the phone she'd known that Belanger, too, was foreign to this place. Maybe as much of an outsider as she was. But she also knew that he fiercely considered this part of the West his turf.

"You're looking at his new paralegal," she said. "Don't worry, it's just half days. I'll have plenty of time to get to Wainwright. I'll get the evidence you need."

His relief was clear. And, she saw now, so was his humiliation. The saboteur had outsmarted him and he knew it. She almost felt sorry for him. He squared his shoulders, ready to do his job in common cause with her. "Liv Andrews it is," he said. "What do you need from me?"

She relaxed. Whatever his personal failures, she felt safer having the local RCMP commander as her ally. "I need to meet him."

"That'll be hard. He's a loner. Hardly ever comes to town."

"Does he have any friends?"

Belanger looked up and down the highway, clearly anxious about being seen with her.

"Sergeant, I need to know who's for him and who's against him."

"Against, that's most of the community."

Liv looked back to check Chris. She'd turned around in the seat, her dark eyes no longer big with fear, just curiosity.

"Come to the meeting tonight," Belanger said.

"Meeting?"

"To crucify me." Bitterness in his voice. He opened his car door and climbed in. "Town hall, seven o'clock. The whole damn town will be there."