

Rescue in Red

By Linda Marie

If only I hadn't bought the red one," Shelley thought ruefully, examining the scratch on her arm. It had been years since she climbed a tree, but fear propelled her to get out of sight quickly. Moving carefully to the thickest part of the leafy branches, she tried to hide her bright cherry red blouse that stood out against the brilliant azure sky and shiny green leaves of the mighty oak she climbed into.

Catching her breath, she tossed her dark hair to the side, and reached into her fanny pack for her cell phone. The sound of crunching leaves sounded through the quiet woods. The two men she overheard in the clearing came crashing through the trail. Shelley held her breath and prayed they couldn't hear the wild beating of her heart. The men stopped a few feet from the tree she was paralyzed with fear in.

"I told you she wouldn't stay on the trail," the short burly dark-haired man spat out in frustration. "If she was on the trail, we'd hear her running."

"If she ran off the trail, we'd hear her running," the taller blonde man retorted. "She must be hiding behind a tree." Listening for the slightest sound, the two men scouted the wooded area. Shelley peered through the branches as two squirrels chased each other across the trail, and a bird chirped its merry song in the distance.

"She's not here," the burly man stated as a matter of fact, giving up the search. "We're not even sure she came this way."

"Maybe," the blonde muttered. He stopped and considered thoughtfully. "We don't know what she saw or heard. Maybe she isn't a threat."

"Then why did she run when we saw her?" countered the burly man.

“Because you yelled and acted guilty!” The blonde glared at his cohort balefully. They stared at each other in silence for a moment. Shelley barely breathed during this exchange. She willed her body to be silent so they wouldn’t look up in the tree she was in.

“Well, she’s not here so we might as well go.” The men traipsed off without trying to be quiet.

I can’t believe they didn’t look up in the trees thought Shelley as she breathed a sigh of relief. She saw and heard more than they knew, but she didn’t see what they buried in the woods. Who were these men and what did they bury at the edge of the clearing? What did they think she witnessed? She pulled out her phone to call for help. No signal. Silence. What to do? As she carefully climbed down from the tree, Shelley realized her car was parked in the lot at the trailhead. What if the men wait for her there? Resolutely, Shelley retrieved her compass from her pack and headed a different direction to the road to avoid the parking lot. She didn’t know who these men were, but they were up to no good or they wouldn’t chase her.

As Shelley walked, listening for sounds of the men, she thought of recent news events. First National Bank had a recent robbery with the two thieves taking a hostage as they escaped. Maybe these were the robbers and they buried the loot till the media frenzy slowed down. But then where was the hostage? Chills went through her as the image of them filling in the hole pervaded her mind.

Shelley froze as she heard a twig snap in the woods. On high alert, she searched for a tree to climb. “Why had she worn this red top today?” she groaned to herself. It stuck out like a maraschino cherry atop a white cloud of whip cream. Realizing there wasn’t a tree to climb, she knelt down among some large roots and tried to cover herself with fallen branches and decaying leaves.

“I’m telling you, I heard something,” the burly man insisted.

“Probably an animal,” the tall blonde scanned the area. He stopped short at the sight of bright red splotches in the midst of a fallen branch and leaves. He rushed over to the tree and pulled the branch off the curled figure nestled in the large roots of the tree.

“Well, well, well!” he exulted. “Looky here, Jeff!” He snatched Shelley’s arm, jerking Shelley to her feet. Shelley stumbled as he shoved her towards Jeff.

“Don’t use my name!” The burly man shouted angrily as he glared at his partner. “Now we have a witness.”

“Witness what?” Shelley protested. “I’m walking in the woods and you yell at me.” She shuddered involuntarily. “I didn’t mean to walk on your property. I thought I was still on public land.” She held her breath as she waited to see if they believed her.

“Why were you hiding?” The blonde narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously.

“Two men yell and chase me when I walk up to them?!” Shelley exclaimed incredulously. “I’m trying to protect myself!” She shook the debris from herself nonchalantly to cover her racing heart. She couldn’t let them know she suspected they were bank robbers and she knew where they buried their loot. She tried to ignore thoughts of the hostage infiltrating her mind.

The two men looked at each other uncertainly. Then Jeff grumbled facetiously, “Great idea to bury the guns. We could shoot her and bury her with the other guy. No witnesses!”

The blonde scowled, “Now we have no choice! If she knew nothing, she does now.”

Shelly didn’t wait. She bolted and ran for her life, both men giving chase. Her red blouse flashed among the trees like a beacon calling ships to shore as she ran helter-skelter through the woods. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she ran full speed, knowing the men were closing in on her.

“Please, God help me!” Shelley cried out in desperation. As she twisted in a new direction to escape her pursuers, she stumbled on a root and fell headlong into the brush. The blonde jerked her to her feet, gripping her arm like a steel vise. Her breath was ragged as fear clutched her heart as she realized she was doomed. Blood dripped from a gash on her forehead from her fall. Tears sprang unbidden, but she blinked them away. She wouldn’t show defeat to these losers. All her senses on high alert, she kept her gaze to the ground as if in defeat.

CRACK. The sound of a twig snapping sounded like a gunshot in the quiet woods. All three froze, but Shelley screamed, “HELP!” Jeff’s hand clamped over her mouth as she struggled to be free. The blonde doubled his fist and cold cocked her into silence as the world went black.

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Shelley barely stifled a groan of pain from the throbbing in her temple as she groggily came to her senses. The scent of Old Spice after shave assailed her nostrils as the motion of her body caused her to feel queasy. Suddenly she was downward spiraling until her body hit solid ground. “Ohhhhh,” she groaned in pain before she could stop herself. She had the presence of mind to lay still.

“You awake?” Jeff kicked her, but she lay limp.

“Don’t wake her up,” the blonde muttered. “We have digging to do.” Both men grabbed the shovels they had left when they first gave chase to the woman lying in a heap at their feet.

Lying still, Shelley’s mind started to clear. She knew she had to do something quickly. Her lifespan was deteriorating before her eyes. A scuffing sound put her senses on high alert. She barely opened her eyes, peering through the narrow slits to see the two robbers digging and rehashing their escape plan. Nothing had startled them.

“Shhhh,” a soft whisper warned her. “Help is on the way.”

The relief washing over Shelley was short lived as Jeff called out, “Finally!” She watched as he pulled his gun from the ground and started wiping the dirt off it. The blonde glanced over at her to see if she came to yet.

“Hey, she moved,” he shouted. He started towards her.

Head spinning, body aching, Shelley bolted upright and ran quickly through the trees. Suddenly a tall man dressed in camouflage hunting gear stepped beside her. He snatched her up and whispered urgently in her ear, “Police are coming anytime now. I followed your red top when I heard the shout for help. It’s like a flag!” She didn’t resist as he pulled her behind a huge oak tree, her heart beating frantically against her chest. How did she know she could trust this man? Was she going from the frying pan into the fire? A peace settled over her as the quiet whisper of hope overshadowed the shouts of the desperate men chasing her. She let the hunter lead her slowly around the massive oak to stay out of sight of the thieves racing by in search of her.

PING. A gunshot reverberated through the trees. Shelley inched closer to the hunter as she saw Jeff’s eyes narrow as he searched the area.

“I know you’re here.” Jeff’s voice hardened. Shelley could hear the shuffling of leaves as the men circled the trees searching for her. How long before they found her?

The hunter gently tapped Shelley’s shoulder and motioned for her to stay put. He stepped away to a distant tree, fired a shot into the air with his powerful hunting rifle, and called out, “Put down your weapons.”

Shelley peeked around the oak to see Jeff and the blonde frozen in confusion. They held on to their weapons, not moving. Only their eyes darted about searching for their prey. She ducked back behind the tree as Jeff looked her way.

“PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS.” The command left no room for argument as a SWAT team came out from the surrounding woods and closed in on the bank robbers. Shelley slid down the tree trunk she was leaning on in shocked relief; her body trembling as the bottled fear drained from her. She saw the robbers set down their weapons and the SWAT team hand cuff and frisk them. The Miranda Rights droned in the background as she closed her eyes and let the sweet knowledge of rescue wash over her. Thank you, God she whispered in her mind.

The hunter squatted beside her. “You’re going to be ok,” he assured her. “It’s over. You’re safe now.” His gentle tone reached Shelley’s ears as her ragged breathing slowed to normal. “It’s a good thing you wore bright red or I would’ve never been able to keep track of you from a distance.”

“My red top saved me?” Shelley asked in disbelief, as the hunter reached out a hand to help her up.

“Yeah,” he grinned mischievously. “It kinda sticks out like a neon light at night.” He helped steady her as she tried to get her balance. “I’m Greg, by the way. How ‘bout we get a cup of coffee to calm our nerves after our interview with the SWAT team? You know they’re going to want to hear our story.”

Shelley looked into Greg’s warm hazel eyes set in his ruggedly handsome face and nodded sweetly.

“I would love a cup of coffee with you.” She took his offered arm and they headed over to the head of the SWAT team, passing the two killers who intended her harm. She looked up at Greg, smiling as she realized her ordeal had turned into something really good. Maybe she should buy matching red pants!

