

*“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.” Anais Nin*

**1**

The sun warmed Allison’s back as she pressed her belly to the rocky ridge overlooking the narrow valley. A slight breeze brought the scent of pine and cinquefoil and damp earth. It felt cool on her skin, and blew a strand of her long brown hair across her face. Brushing the errant hair aside, she adjusted her binoculars to focus on the young female gray wolf that loped up the valley toward the group. The entire pack stood still, their heads swinging toward the newcomer as one. A large male stood farthest out in front. He was solid black, except for the gray tip of his tail. Fanned out behind him were seven others, three males and four females, all intent on the approach of the young female. She trotted unevenly, as though one leg was shorter than the rest, making her gait look uncomfortable and stiff. As the wolf drew closer to the group, Allison could see that one foot was mutilated, probably injured by a trap during the winter.

While still at a distance, the female wolf’s ears pricked forward toward the pack. But as she got closer, her attitude began to change. Her ears fell closer to her head and her head dropped, not in a threatening way, but rather in a kind of deference. Her tail wagged vigorously like a great white flag. There was no hesitation in her approach, though, as she trotted right up to the black male, tipping her head sideways so as to look up at him from below. After a brief greeting, the crippled female wolf moved to a very proud gray female, lowering herself to her

belly in submission and reaching up to lick her muzzle. The alpha female greeted her gently, and the act seemed to be a signal to the others to rush forward to greet the new arrival. She was soon covered in a jumble of wagging, licking fur as the entire group joined the reunion. The final pack member had arrived, driven by spring and the promise of the fat summer season to come.

As Allison watched the affectionate reunion of the wolf pack, she felt a pang of envy. If only people were that accepting of each other.

A cloud passing across the sun made Allison shiver. It took so little to change the temperature in the mountains in the spring. She gazed again at the wolves roughhousing and nuzzling each other and felt a kinship with them. They had been almost like her family for three years now.

Gray wolves were reintroduced into the Spotted Bear drainage in 1998. A lone male was the first, and then almost a year later, a female and five pups were moved to Spotted Bear from Idaho. Allison's job was to track the progress of this pack, study their habits, and try to learn how to help them reestablish their kind in the lower 48. Their history was so tragic, their future so uncertain, but little by little they were making their way back from the edge of extinction. She hoped fervently that they would succeed.

The wolves were on the move. Although the alpha male, Black Tip, wore a radio transmitter, so she knew she could find them again, she wanted to observe and document the denning process, so she tracked them with her binoculars from the ridgeline, and began to hike. Sometimes her view of the wolves was obscured by thick forest, and sometimes she had to slog through a snowdrift in her hiking boots and gators, but she kept them in sight most of the time by following the ridgeline as they moved through the valley. She felt fairly sure that the alpha

female, which she had named Eve, would be true to form and den at the head of the valley. It had been a wet winter, and the hunting would be good there.

She hurried into a rocky clearing where she had an unobstructed view of the valley below. As she lifted her binoculars to her eyes again, she was blinded by a bright flash, and a high, piercing noise attacked her ears. She screamed as a thousand needles of pain shot into her brain. The mountain ridge faded with her blurring vision, and she crumpled to her knees, clutching at her ears. It was all around her, inside her. Searing, white pain. And noise, thundering, dissonant noise, like a huge crowd of people screaming at her. Voices, yet unintelligible, chaotic. She had no idea how much time was passing, only that the noise and pain seemed to intensify. She fell to the ground, writhing, enveloped by agony.

## 2

As suddenly as it started, the noise and pain stopped. Vanished. Complete silence. She felt a cool breeze on her face. Somewhere a bird twittered and she dared to open her eyes to blue sky and fluffy white clouds sailing overhead. Shivering against the breeze on her sweat-soaked body, she struggled to a sitting position.

“What in the hell was that?” she mumbled, and propped herself, panting, against a rock. Shrugging out of her daypack, she fumbled for her water bottle, bringing it shakily to her lips. *I’ve never felt anything like that, she thought. Not since I was a kid.*

She looked around her at the mountain ridge. It appeared unchanged. The birds sang. A fly buzzed past her ear and landed on her arm and she shooed it away. The world around her seemed unaffected, yet she sat panting in a pool of sweat. Could it have all been in her mind? Shivering more from fear than cold, she felt vulnerable, exposed, and realized that she had never felt that way out here before. She looked around suspiciously at the silent lodgepole pine trees nearby, as if expecting them to reveal some sinister threat, perhaps a cast of thousands to jump out from behind their stately trunks. But they just rustled faintly in the breeze.

*Maybe I’m having some kind of delusion, some kind of bizarre flashback, or something I ate. She sniggered aloud. Maybe someone slipped some LSD into my refried beans. Psychedelic burritos. Yeah, right.*

She pulled her pile jacket from her pack and put it on over her cold sweat. *I need a psychiatrist. I need to talk to Ellie. Ellie always knows what to do.*

All of her adult life Allison had lived in fear of the chaos returning, signaling her final descent into insanity. Her gut clenched. Perhaps the time had arrived. She felt frantic to get to a landline phone and talk to Ellie. Wolves forgotten for the time being, Allison repacked her binoculars and her water bottle, shouldered her daypack, and set off down the trail. She still felt shaky and tried to focus all her energy on one thing, getting out of the mountains. After twenty minutes of brisk hiking, she arrived at her camp, only to grab her car keys and set off again.

She fought the urge to run down the trail. The trees grew thicker as she descended in elevation, and they threw lengthening shadows across the trail as the afternoon sun sank farther toward the west. *I've got to hold it together*, she thought, and shook her head like a dog shedding water. *If I'm going to go crazy, I'll be damned if I do it before I talk to Ellie. Just hike. Don't think about it now.*

But images of her childhood surged unbidden into her head, pictures of people pulling her hands away from her ears and yelling at her, their voices lost in a cacophony of noise and confusion inside her head, pictures of her sitting alone in her room, rocking back and forth, back and forth, trying to find a place inside herself where it was quiet.

She first met Ellie when she was 13. Her school counselor suggested that Allison see her. Although by then Allison was performing adequately in school, she was emotionally volatile, sometimes screaming in frustration, or collapsing into tears, or giving over into fits of violent rage. Coupled with an understandably fragile self-esteem, she was a cause for concern to school officials, not to mention her parents.

Ellie was old enough to be Allison's mother. She wore her silvering blonde hair short, and teased it in the front to make it seem bigger. Allison thought it made her look like someone from the 1950s. Her soft cardigan sweaters added to the affect. She had calm gray-blue eyes and a quiet voice, and talked to Allison like she was an adult, rather than a child or a crazy person. When Allison talked, Ellie listened without judging.

As Allison thought about how Ellie had helped her gain control of her emotions over fifteen years ago, she became calmer. Ellie's patient encouragement had taken her from the edge of suicide to the beginning of a more normal life. She would know what to do about this. Allison's heart rate slowed and her strides took on a more even rhythm. By the time she emerged at the trailhead and unlocked her brown Toyota Corolla, the shadows were deep and the light was taking on a golden hue. Throwing her daypack in first, she climbed behind the wheel.

A cloud of dust billowed up behind her car as she drove down the winding dirt road. She was feeling quite normal now. *Everything will be fine. I'm just overreacting again. It can't have been as bad as I thought it was.* Reaching the main forest road, still dirt but wider and more level, she increased her speed and reached for the water bottle inside her daypack with one hand. She had just opened it and brought it to her lips when white-hot pain exploded inside her head. The water bottle slipped from her fingers and its contents splashed onto the seat as the road disappeared behind a wall of torturous noise. By the time she managed to react enough to slam on the brakes it was too late. The little car found the edge of the dirt road and careened into the ditch. Time seemed to move in slow motion, and she caught a glimpse of a huge Douglas fir through the haze of flying dirt. That was the last thing she remembered seeing before her head hit the steering wheel.

**3**

The early morning sun burst over the top of the mountain and streamed through the old-fashioned wavy window glass into the spartan bedroom, bathing the four-poster in warm light. The bed's occupant stirred almost immediately, if only to bury his head more deeply under the covers. But within minutes it was too hot to stay cocooned in blankets, and he threw them back and headed for the bathroom to start his day.

John started every morning this way. In his estimation it beat having to listen to the squawk of an alarm clock. A quick shower and he was wiping the steam off his bathroom mirror so he could shave. After making a half-hearted attempt at combing his somewhat unruly dirty blonde hair, he pulled on a t-shirt and buttoned his uniform shirt over it. Then he padded on bare feet over the cold pine floors of his 100 year-old farmhouse to the kitchen and the second important ritual of his day; a cup of black coffee brewed automatically by his timer-activated coffee maker. He took his coffee cup with him to the back porch, where he sat on the bare wood and let his feet dangle over the side.

He loved this place. And he didn't think he would ever take it for granted after so many years in the city. He blessed the day he landed a law enforcement job with the Flathead National Forest.

When he thought about his former life in New Jersey, he found it hard to breathe. There was very little John missed about it. Except Zach. John worried about being so far away from his son as he struggled through his teen years. He knew the divorce had been hard on Zach, and it made him feel guilty. Thinking about his black-eyed son, his dark hair parted down the middle, standing by the car in his little league uniform with the pants too short, waiting for John to drive him to the game, made him smile. But he had grown so big and changed so much since then. They both had.

He and Zach were still okay. Zach seemed to accept why John had to leave his former life; the superficiality and meaninglessness of the business world. Or maybe he was just glad that the shouting between his parents had come to an end. Even though Zach was and would always be a city boy, he liked to come to Montana in the summer, and they went fishing and hiking. Last Christmas they went cross-country skiing and cut their own Christmas tree.

But in Zach's last letter he said he had a girlfriend, and he sounded more serious than he had ever been about a girl before. He talked about late night parties on weekends. John worried about what went on at those parties. Drugs? Sex? The kid was only fifteen! His priority should be school. Wasn't his mother paying *any* attention? She was probably off at her own party with that Casanova boyfriend of hers.

John shook his head and sipped his coffee. It was still another month before he would see Zach. He resolved to call him after work and talk about it. A light breeze ruffled his hair and blew the steam off his coffee mug, and he inhaled the cleanness of it. He swore you could smell the morning sun. It smelled clean and warm and completely new. Droplets of dew sparkled on the sparse grass and colorful wildflowers that were scattered about his yard. Most people where he came from would call them weeds. People where he came from would probably dispute the

term 'yard'. He never mowed or watered, but just let the area around his house do whatever it wanted. He liked it that way, completely lacking in human-imposed structure.

Glancing at his watch, he took another drink of coffee before pulling himself to his feet and going back into the house for his boots and breakfast. Re-emerging a few minutes later, buttered toast in hand, he headed across his gravel driveway to his truck. The Forest Service green of the truck offended his architect's eye. Set against the spring day; it stood out like it was trying too hard to blend in. *At least the mud splattered on the sides help soften the affect*, he thought, smiling to himself.

Ten minutes later, he pulled his truck into a vacant space in front of the Forest Service Office in Kalispell. On his way into the building he waved to the fresh-faced fishery biologist, Tom, who waved back energetically. He was no doubt on his way to measure some trout or something. Tom always made John smile. He had never known anyone so enthusiastic about fish. It didn't matter whether he was catching them with a fishing pole, or electrocuting them so their little bodies floated temporarily belly up to be counted; be they non-native trout or endangered minnows, he could wax on about their virtues endlessly. John appreciated his unfettered enthusiasm.

John smiled a good morning to the skinny, blue-eyed receptionist at the front desk, declining her eager offer to bring him a fresh cup of coffee. Stopping by the employee lounge, he grabbed the coffee himself, plus a donut from the box that was, as always, sitting next to the coffee pot.

"Morning John," cooed the Super's redheaded secretary. "Finally run out of excuses for avoiding your desk?"

“Morning,” John said. Was her name Joan or Jane? “Thought I’d better come in before the pile’s too big to see over.”

He felt her eyes following him as he walked on down the hall. She called after him. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, that’s for sure.”

“Nice to see you, too,” he said, giving her a mock salute before entering his corner office and closing the door. When he looked at the reports waiting to be done, he had a strong urge to turn around and leave again. “I hate this part,” he said, shaking his head. Reluctantly, he put down his coffee cup and pulled his chair up to the desk.

Several hours later John was still in his office, bent over his reports, and the room was getting hot. He had already opened all the windows, but he was having trouble concentrating. Finally, he pushed his chair back.

“Enough is enough,” he said to the cluttered desk, and grabbing his radio and keys, he started for his truck. “I’ll be up at Hungry Horse Lake if you need to find me,” he said, waving his radio at the receptionist.

By the time he had stopped by the Burger Haven drive-through and steered his truck onto Highway 2, it was past three o’clock. At least he could get up to Hungry Horse in time for the evening fishing crowd.

Hungry Horse Reservoir sat just a few miles outside the border of Glacier National Park. Only about 30 minutes from Kalispell, the long skinny lake lay nestled between the Swan and Flathead Ranges. It was smaller than Flathead Lake, but it had a more remote feel to it, too, surrounded as it was by National Forest land. People were always trying to cheat the catch limits on their fishing licenses, and sneak unlicensed boats onto the water. That was fine with John, because it gave him an excuse to hang out at his favorite lake.

By the time he had finished patrolling the east shore of the lake and arrived at the inlet where the south fork of the Flathead drained in, he had cited three fishermen, and the shadows were getting long. Without the patrol boat, that was about as much as he could hope for. Saturday he would get out in the boat. Tonight he was content to watch the early evening sun glint off the lake. The South Fork Trailhead parking area was nearly vacant of cars and quiet, so he turned his truck back and took the west side road back toward the lake. Windows rolled down, he took his time, inhaling the pine-scented air and thinking how he would bring Zach up here some evening and go fishing and talk about new girls and wild parties.

A small brown Toyota with its front wheels in the ditch and its hood folded around a large Douglas fir tree jolted him from his thoughts. A cloud of dust and gravel spewed from beneath his braking tires as he pulled over behind the little car, his senses suddenly sharp. When he saw the crumpled form in the driver's seat, his heart began to pound. The front end of the vehicle was completely crumpled, and the door was stuck, but when he yanked on it with all his might it came free. A small woman with long brown hair lay slumped over the steering wheel. Finding a pulse at her carotid artery, he gently raised her head and laid her back against the seat, taking care not to jar her spine. Her breathing was shallow, but regular, and he began to assess her condition starting at her head and working his way down. He was relieved to find no apparent skull fractures or obvious spinal injuries.

As he checked her shoulders and arms, she opened her eyes, and he spoke to her, hoping to elicit a response. At first she just stared vacantly ahead, but after a few moments, her eyes started to focus and she turned toward him.

"Who are you?" she croaked, staring at his uniform.

He smiled his relief. "Welcome back. I'm John. I'm an EMT, and I'm going to help you."

“Thanks,” she said.

“What’s your name?”

“Allison.”

Encouraged that she knew who she was, he said, “Do you have any idea how you got wrapped around this tree?”

“I...uh...blacked out I guess...OUCH!”

“Sorry. Looks like you may have cracked a rib or two.” After checking her legs and feet, which seemed uninjured, he said, “I’m going to get a c-collar out of my truck to stabilize your neck. Just a precaution. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

He decided to bring her in to the hospital himself instead of waiting for an ambulance, since he found no evidence of spinal injury and she was awake and oriented. It would take at least 45 minutes for an ambulance to get this far up the lake, and he was concerned that she might sink into shock by then. After wrapping a fat, foam-lined collar around her neck and strapping her arm to her chest over her injured ribs with a triangle bandage, he squatted next to the car. “I’m going to lift you out of here and into my truck now. Hold on.”

“That’s very nice of you, but I’m sure I can walk.”

“No. I would rather you didn’t because of your head injury. You might feel dizzy.” He smiled reassuringly. “It’s all in the EMT procedure manual. Trust me.”

“If you insist,” she said, looking relieved.

Sliding one arm behind her back and the other under her legs, John lifted her slack body into his arms. She was surprisingly light. As he slid her onto the bench seat of the truck and belted her in, he decided not to mention the fact that she hadn’t had her seatbelt on in her car.

Quickly, he scanned the Toyota for any important papers or valuables, and grabbed the backpack off the front seat. Then he closed the car door, wrapped a piece of red flagging around the antenna to show that the accident had been found, and slid hurriedly behind the steering wheel of the truck.

As soon as they were under way, he radioed the after hours dispatcher and had her alert the hospital in Columbia Falls. Pushing his speed as much as he dared in the fading light, he glanced nervously at Allison's now closed eyes and pale skin. Shock was indeed setting in, despite the warmth from the jacket he had pulled from under the seat and draped over her. Praying silently that she didn't have any internal bleeding, he pressed the accelerator to the floor.

*“Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.” Albert Einstein*

## 25

The gurgle in Richard’s stomach tonight had nothing to do with hunger, and everything to do with anticipation. He stood poised to recreate the Gap’s harmonic field for the second time in 24 hours. The Gap remained stable for nearly two minutes when Richard opened it last night. The photographs he took had shown only a blur of light issuing from the equipment, but maybe he could use them. They did prove the Gap existed.

He had duplicated all the conditions exactly tonight. If the Gap held again, he would have proved that a stable field was possible. Taking a ragged breath, he initiated the sequence and stood back. First, the now familiar intensifying hum... and the undulating field of the Gap shimmered to life. As he waited, it continued to pulse gently, and his exultation grew. He had done it! The field was holding perfectly. He had opened a stable gateway to another dimension.

The only thing left to do was to step through. Where and when would the doorway take him to? If String Theory and his equations were correct, he should emerge into a parallel dimension at roughly the same time on a different time line. In other words, he should walk into a parallel world that had followed a different time line, been affected by different events. Of course, if there was a flaw in the theories of physics or his equations, he might walk into the

vacuum of space or a completely uninhabitable environment on the other side of the galaxy. Or he might walk into absolutely nothing, or have his atoms torn apart in the process of passing through. Richard felt a chill pass down his spine.

In a way, Allison was right when she said there was no way of knowing how the Gap would affect our world. Touching the unknown is a dangerous thing. But discovery always involves risk. It is an integral part of moving knowledge forward. Her concerns about it made him think, though. He had never considered that there might be an ethical component to what he was doing. Did he have the right to manipulate space-time when he didn't really know how it would affect this reality? Or did he have a responsibility to the future of mankind to push human knowledge forward? If he didn't do it, someone else eventually would. And the thought of watching someone else get the credit for what he had worked so long for was intolerable.

With renewed resolve he moved toward the Gap. The closer he came to it, the stranger he felt. It almost felt like static electricity was coursing through his body. He began to feel lighter somehow.

He moved closer.

The field of the Gap continued to undulate, but he didn't have much time before it would collapse. The computer was programmed to recreate it after 10 minutes. That should be enough time for any atmospheric ionization to dissipate. *The final frontier*, he thought, his heart pounding in his throat.

It was almost instantaneous. As soon as he touched the field with his hand, he felt it sucking him in. It was like an electric current racing up his arm into his body. There was no time for pain, thought, or sensation.

He just winked out, disappearing into the shimmering space that was the Gap. A few seconds later the field collapsed, plunging the forest into quiet darkness.

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Allison reached her camp shortly after mid-day. She unloaded the few supplies she had brought in and made lunch, anxious to get to the wolves in the afternoon. As she ate, she planned her strategy.

The pups should be just about big enough to join the adults on the hunt. Hopefully they hadn't left the den yet. She would need to make plans to track them and observe the hunt. It would be interesting to watch the pups develop their hunting skills. At first they would just be left hidden near the action and made to wait, but it wouldn't be too many more weeks before they would join in. Even at the den they practiced their technique, sneaking up on insects, small rodents, their parents, each other; whatever happened to be handy. Allison had seen Champion catch a ground squirrel one day. The whole existence of the pups revolved around practicing for adulthood, and what started out as play would develop into deadly skill by the time they grew up.

Allison hurried through her food and packed up her notebook, binoculars and water bottle for an afternoon and evening of wolf observation. She wasn't five minutes from camp when she saw Richard heading toward her. She felt a jolt of excitement at seeing him, which was followed immediately by a brief wave of guilt for feeling that way. When he saw her he smiled broadly and quickened his pace.

"It's good to see you," Richard said as he reached her. "This forest is awfully quiet without the Wolf Lady."

He was acting like he had never coerced her into leaving. For a moment she considered bringing that up, but she decided to drop it, since she was glad to see him, too. So she smiled. “You seem to have survived. In fact,” she said, appraising him critically, “You seem to have developed a bit of glow about you.”

“That’s just because I’m glad you’re back,” he said, turning to walk with her. “May I come watch wolves with you?” He was being uncharacteristically warm, she thought, but she nodded.

“So, did you find anything out about your seizures?”

Allison made a face. “I found out what they’re not,” she said, and then recited, “I have no tumors, viruses, or infections.”

“That’s great news!” he said.

His exuberance was unnerving.

“Yeah, well, the doctor did find some swelling in the frontal lobe of my brain; cause unknown,” she said, thinking the news wasn’t *that* great.

“Oh,” he said, sounding more like the reserved Richard she was used to. “Doesn’t he have *any* idea what could be causing it?”

“Not really. He thinks it has to do with my sensitivity to sensory information; that my brain is being overloaded with some kind of environmental input out here. It doesn’t make much sense,” she said, shaking her head. As they walked along, she studied his profile. The tightly wound tension she was used to seeing in him had suddenly reappeared.

“So, what are you supposed to do now?” he asked.

“The doctor gave me some medicine to reduce the swelling. That is supposed to promote healing,” she said, picking her way over some deadfall.

“Do you feel any different?” he asked behind her.

“My headache is better, although not completely gone yet,” she said, clearing the deadfall and waiting for him to catch up.

“That’s good,” he said, “But is that all? Is it really a good idea to be out here right now?” He caught up to her. She turned impatiently and began to walk again.

“I do have work to do, you know,” she said. “Besides, if the cause is out here, being out here is the only way to discover it.”

“And *John* is okay with this?” he said, his tone dripping with disdain.

She stopped again and faced him. “*John* is being realistic. Besides, I bought a satellite phone so I can call for help if it happens again. Maybe they can tell more if I get to the hospital soon after it happens.”

“A satellite phone,” Richard said. “That’s not a bad idea. Although you can’t very well use it if you’re unconscious or dead!”

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated.” Allison’s voice was icy. “It’s the best we can do right now.”

“I suppose it is, considering how bullheaded you are being about it,” he shot back angrily.

They glared at each other. Then Richard looked away and sighed. “Look, I’m just concerned about you, that’s all. You’re taking some pretty big risks with your health.”

The edge melted off Allison’s anger. “I’ll be careful,” she said, not sure what difference it would make. Still, she didn’t want to be mad at Richard, so she tried changing the subject.

“So, what did you do this week?” she asked. “You must have had some extra time since you weren’t watching wolves with me.” Then she added, “You weren’t watching the wolves were you?”

“No,” Richard said, seeming relieved to change the subject, too. “I hiked out to re-supply and spent some time photographing other things.” They began walking again. “But I am looking forward to seeing the wolves again. I’m becoming rather attached to them.”

Allison smiled. “They do grow on you, don’t they?”

As they approached the area where the wolf den was, they fell silent. Storm clouds threatened overhead, and they donned their rain gear before continuing toward the observation log. Allison led the way, as usual, and they settled in behind the log, side by side. Pulling her binoculars up, she began eagerly searching the clearing. Richard fiddled with his camera lens, preparing to join her.

Suddenly Allison stiffened. “Oh, no,” she breathed. “Oh, *no!*”