

## Lion and Lamb

Bunty had not gone back to visit her brother in their childhood hometown for many years. Plane tickets had grown so expensive, and besides, the weather in her new home was perfect year-round. Rarely did it get cold or rain. The weather was so perfectly dry, a balm for her arthritis. The sun shone 360 days a year, with the other five only partly cloudy. It was a beautiful thing to wake up in the morning and know exactly what the weather would be like. No need to fuss over umbrellas or galoshes. No keeping separate wardrobes for the changing seasons. Her community catered to her every need. When her water heater broke, the association sent a repairman. The lawns and landscapes were maintained and manicured. If bats got into her attic, animal control removed them with no questions asked.

Bunty's brother, Leo, knew not to disturb his older sister's peace. He knew better than to insist that Bunty visit him across the country, which was why Bunty found it so strange that Leo's tone should take a sudden sense of urgency. Why now, after all these years, did Leo insist that Bunty fly out to see him? What were the exact words he had left in his phone message? "It would be so meaningful for me if you would come home for a short visit."

Bunty had prepared a list of attractive reasons for Leo to fly her way instead. She adjusted her reading glasses and laid out her handwritten list on the table next to the phone. She dialed his number.

"I just checked the flights," she said to her brother. "I don't understand how the airlines can charge so much. Did you know they actually charge extra for passengers to take luggage now? Who is going on a trip without a suitcase?"

Leo replied, "I already told you, I can buy your ticket."

Bunty clicked her tongue in disapproval. "I can't ask you to do that! It's too expensive!"

"I have the airline miles to trade in," Leo insisted. "I've flown out to see you so many times that I have enough frequent flyer miles for a dozen tickets. Besides, wouldn't it be nice for you to come back home for a change?"

Bunty would not give in so easily. She skipped to the last item on her list, her coup de grâce. "But we'd miss the hot air balloon festival. I know how much you love an adventure." Bunty paused to let the appeal of a hot air balloon ride sink in. Her brother did love adventure. She thought the opportunity to go hot air ballooning would render him speechless and at last convince him to visit her.

"That sounds wonderful," Leo said. "You know how much I love an adventure. But I've already bought your ticket."

"Leo!" Bunty exclaimed. "But...but..." She was shocked. She was speechless. She knew she had been beaten. No matter how much Bunty wanted to stay put, a visit to her brother and her childhood hometown was long overdue.

"But what?" Leo asked.

Bunty closed her eyes and bit her lip. She took a deep breath. But I can't possibly is what she wanted to say. "But that's so generous of you" is what she did say. "I'm so lucky to have such a great brother."

"I'll email you all the details," Leo said. His voice had sped up, and he spoke with obvious excitement. "I'll pick you up at the airport. The weather might be a little iffy, so be sure to pack a warm coat and some boots. Oh, and bring a swimsuit. We can visit the hot springs for a dip."

Bunty's mind raced. Winter coat, boots, and a swimsuit? By the time she hung up the phone, she needed to lie down.

A few short weeks later, Bunty sat on an airplane. Her brother had made the flight as luxurious as possible for her. She flew first class. The seat was comfortable, and she had ample legroom. The flight attendants were courteous. Even the food tasted good. But no matter how enjoyable the flight, Bunty was panic-stricken during landing as they descended through the clouds and into a raging blizzard. Bunty remembered those storms in the high mountains. A clear blue sky could turn suddenly into a blinding maelstrom of snow, especially in late spring.

As the plane rocked and dipped, Bunty gripped the armrests tight and stared straight ahead. She thought back to the dry desert air, the dining club, the community pool.

Leo must have sensed his sister's dread when he picked her up at the curb. "Snow came out of nowhere," he said, taking her lone piece of luggage. "It wasn't in the forecast. How was your landing?"

"That's why I don't fly," Bunty said. She had repeatedly told herself to hold her tongue and not start her visit on a sour note by complaining to her brother about the awful flight, but she could not help herself.

Bunty climbed into her brother's car, a stout and rugged jeep, and glanced in the rearview mirror. She saw Leo loading her suitcase. She saw his face. She saw him roll his eyes, already exasperated at her complaining.

"You're the one who bought me the ticket," she said under her breath.

Soon, the stiff little car was zipping along the highway. Even with the windshield wipers moving as fast as they could, Bunty couldn't see more than a few feet in front of them. Yet Leo seemed perfectly comfortable pushing on, speeding down the highway through the whiteout.

"A shame you can't see the mountains through the snow," Leo said.

Bunty did not reply. She didn't dare speak. Instead, she held tightly to the handhold and tried to keep from being nauseous.

"Whoa, what's this?" Leo asked. They had just turned off the highway and were now ascending into the mountains along a narrow, wooded roadway. A steep slope fell down from the road's edge. A set of tire tracks through the snow veered wildly from the opposite lane and plunged over the side down the slope.

Leo stopped the car. Bunty watched as he ventured out into the blizzard and peered down the slope.

When Leo returned, he was completely covered with snow. "There's a car down there," he said. "It skidded off the road." He pushed open the door to leave the car a second time.

"Where are you going?" Bunty asked.

"To help them," Leo said. He put on his gloves and hat. "I'll tow them up with the winch."

Bunty said, "Are you crazy?"

Leo slammed the door shut behind him, leaving Bunty alone. She watched as her brother, with tow cable in hand, hopped over the edge and disappeared.

Bunty waited a moment. Was her brother a hero or a crazy man? Finally, she was overcome by worry for her brother, and she exited the car to look over the road's edge.

The storm was beginning to subside. She could easily see Leo as he waded through knee-deep snow down the mountainside. Luckily, the car had not fallen too far and was lodged against a tree. Its yellow hazard lights flashed in distress.

Leo reached the car and wiped a thick layer of snow from the windows. He signaled to the people inside and began to attach the hook under the car to the front axle. He looked up to Bunty and signaled with his hands for her to start the winch and pull them up. When she made no acknowledgement, Leo's gestures became more frantic, more insistent.

"Okay, okay," Bunty muttered. She threw her hands up in exasperation, engaged the gear on the winch, and got into the driver's seat of the jeep. At least the car was warm inside.

Having grown up in the mountains, Bunty knew how to operate a winch. She had very vivid memories of assisting her father in just these situations. Whether it was winter snow or spring floods, in country as rugged as this, it was imperative that neighbors look out for each other. There was an unspoken code of conduct in these parts.

Bunty was not happy. Her brother's simple winch seemed completely inadequate for pulling the car up the slope in deep snow.

Halfway through, the tow cable could snap, allowing the car to slide even farther down the slope. Or worse, the car could be so heavy that Leo's jeep could be pulled over the edge and down the mountainside with Bunty in it. But wasn't that what life was like in the mountains? You take those risks, especially when it meant coming to the aid of others. Your heroics would be celebrated with stories told at family gatherings or at the saloon over a few cold ones. It was by-and-large a culture that Bunty had long forgotten.

"What the heck," Bunty said. She almost smiled when she turned on the winch and felt it begin to pull.

The cable came up slowly. Bunty could hear the grinding whir of the small motor. The sun was chasing the clouds away. Already, she could see water dripping from the surrounding trees as the snow began to melt. They had arrived just in time to help the poor car. In a short half hour, the slope would be sodden. A rescue in the mud would be much more difficult.

Bunty halted the winch and threw Leo's jeep into reverse. She backed the vehicle up, away from the road's edge, and turned it slightly to get a better angle for the tow cable. She started the winch again. Bunty was impressed: Leo had spared no expense. The winch was hydraulic and tapped right into the jeep's power-steering pump. It pulled smooth, cool, and powerful. Before long, Bunty spied the nose of the small sedan creeping over the mountain edge. She saw her brother's smiling face through the windshield.

By the time hands had been shaken, thanks had been given, and the sedan had driven off down the road, the clouds had cleared enough for the mountains to be visible in the distance. Leo could not help but look at his older sister with awe and respect.

"You can take the girl out of the mountains, but you can't take the mountains out of the girl," he said.

Bunty looked out at the far range. It was one she knew intimately, having hiked every crag and valley in her youth. A warm breeze whistled up and over the mountain pass. The smell of pine needles filled her nostrils.

Already, most all of the snow had melted. In fact, not a patch of snow remained. Rivulets of water ran down the road.

Yes, she had been away for too long. Bunty wrapped her arm around her brother's neck.

"That's one heck of a winch you have there," she remarked.

"I have it connected right into my power-steering pump," Leo said.

"I noticed." The sun was beginning to fall behind the far mountains. Riding the breeze was a hint of the cold that would descend come nightfall. "The roads are gonna freeze up terrible tonight," Bunty said.

"We better get going, then."

Before Leo could get into the jeep, Bunty asked, "Do you think we have time for a dip in the hot springs before we get home?"

Leo smiled. "I sure do." It felt good to have his sister back.

**The End**

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