

Active member, Sister-in Crime

## Too Good To Be True

By

Mar Preston

Holly stepped out of the village patrol Jeep and walked with dragging steps into Silva Bella Café. The wind whipping around her was heavy with the smell of approaching winter snows that often shut down the California mountain town. She shivered thinking of standing in the wind for hours directing traffic around vehicles stuck in a snowbank.

Her blind date, Jim Berenson, turned out to be taller than she was, more than presentable, and told a couple of stories that made her laugh. Holly liked his looks, the way he listened when she was talking, and asked her questions rather than making the whole conversation about him. Like everyone else in Sierra Mountain Village, Jim Berenson wanted to hear about the burglaries and the horses rescued from a hoarder.

Just as Holly was relaxing, Christy, her best friend and fellow patrol officer, marched into the busy cafe with the excuse she was picking up a takeout lunch. Holly rolled her eyes. She knew damn well Christy was there to make sure she had shown up.

Holly introduced her to Jim Berenson, and the conversation flowed. She and Christy stepped all over each other telling the story about finding a late model Saturn parked crosswise across the narrow alley behind Crazy Al's bar. No driver. Doors open. Keys in it. They finally

located the driver, a laid off cement plant worker, curled up in the doorway of the little hardware store, sleeping it off.

Holly grinned. "He must've been so drunk he thought he was in his own garage at home."

"How long do you figure it would have taken him to wiggle that car in sideways like that, an inch at a time?" Christy said, slapping the table.

Berenson had some good stories of his own about insurance fraud coming from his work as an accident investigator.

When Christy left, Holly told him she had three dogs and eight cats, waiting for his reaction. To her surprise, there was nothing in Berenson's face that told her he thought she was over the edge. "I foster SPCA animals until the SPCA finds homes for them."

"It must be hard to give them up," he said, leaning closer.

"No, it just means I've freed up a place to take another dog or cat that needs a home."

"I've had a lot of dogs over my lifetime. It hurts bad when they die." His brows drew together.

Holly's antennae went up to anybody who told her *the dog ran away*, or worse *he got run over by a car*.

"How did they die?"

"Mostly old age," he said. "Sometimes the vet helped them along."

Lunch ended and when she had to go back to work, she was glad she'd turned up. That afternoon she and Christy discussed Jim Berenson parsing every word he'd said, and dissecting what they knew about him, which wasn't much. He was new in town, rented one of the nicer vacant homes.

Lunch led to a dinner that weekend, again at Silva Bella. The dating ritual required a lot of effort, yet Holly found it wasn't that hard to let herself like Jim Berenson. After dinner they strolled along the two-block long main street, holding hands. When he leaned over to kiss her, she kissed him back and it felt good.

\*

Holly signed them up for an animal tracking class on a sunny December day. Berenson arrived early to pick her up at her cabin to a cacophony of dogs barking. She made sure she had everything: water, sunscreen, knee pads, a ruler showing sixteenths of an inch, and money to buy the tracker's field guide. Jim was in a boisterous good mood, and kept putting his hand on her knee, as he related a long story about a car he'd fixed up while they drove down the mountain.

Why didn't the guy realize most women didn't care about cars, other than what color they were, and that they would go where you wanted. Holly changed the subject and began to like Jim even better when he shut up about cars. Maybe he was nervous too.

Ten people waited in a parking lot outside a nearby state park that was the site of historic reenactments. The tracker, Dan Lamont, was a grizzled seventy-something with a weather-beaten face and a soft voice. Jim Berenson put his arm around her shoulders while Lamont passed around plaster casts of tracks for them to examine. Holly wanted to shrug his arm off and pay attention but didn't. His arm around her shoulders felt good. It had been a long, long time.

Today they would learn not only to identify species but how fast the animal was traveling, and in what direction, when the animal raised its head, looked down, or stopped to look right and left. That seemed impossible, but Dan Lamont was internationally known as a tracker.

Holly tried to memorize the plaster cast tracks of a grey fox, mountain lion, deer, bobcat, all the different rabbits and coyote. Lamont led the group up a steep road at a good clip. Jim Berenson puffed alongside her, asking about where she'd gone to school, her first job, making a real attempt to get to know her. She hadn't told him about making detective and being shot.

Mr. Lamont split the group up into teams, reminding them of the difference between cats--such as bobcats and mountain lions, and dogs--foxes and coyotes. He added wryly, "Never eliminate the domestic dog or cat. People leave them up here and the ones that survive go feral."

Lamont had gone ahead in the early morning and put Popsicle sticks in the roadway next to tracks. "You have to look, I mean really look," he said, returning to check on their progress. He crouched close to the ground like a catcher.

"See right here?" He pointed. "What's that?"

Gradually a pad with four toes and no indentation at the top took shape in the sand. Lamont left them to help other teams. Holly and Jim argued mildly about whether this was a dog track in the four indentations marked by the Popsicle sticks showing which direction the animal was travelling.

"I think it's a fox. Maybe coyote," Holly said.

Berenson looked over his shoulder, face close to the ground. "Going uphill at a trot.

"I'm pretty sure it's a grey fox," Holly said, conviction in her voice.

"Yeah, maybe." He gave in awfully easily Holly, noticed.

Lamont knelt beside them, his knees creaking. Yes, it was probably a grey fox--but he was going downhill--not at a trot but at a lope. The fox stopped, Lamont pointed--here--to look over his left shoulder. Look how the right front paw pointed slightly in a left direction.

Holly and Jim grinned at each other.

“Okay, at least we got the species right,” Jim said.

Other teams were struggling too. They strolled away to a shady place under a spreading oak tree.

Lamont chased them off. “Not there, please. I want to use that location to show how to find tracks in deep grasses.”

Holly spotted a grassy berm and strolled over to it, careful to check for rattlesnakes before she sat on a decaying log. There was an easy silence while she and Jim enjoyed the fresh fall day, mild for December. The sunshine warmed their faces; the breezes brought the scent of pines and chaparral eddying up from the valley floor. The steep decline fell away into rolling blond hills covered with grasses and dotted with shrubs and stands of sagebrush. On the distant hills dark green smudges marked a stand of oak trees.

"So," Jim said, "you ever been married?"

"Nope, not even close. What brought that up? You proposing?" She said with a laugh.

"Well, hardly." He laughed uncomfortably and she began to like him more.

"How about you?"

"Well, my wife went over to her Mom's one day and never came home again. We're not quite divorced, but we're not living together," he said turning quickly to face her. "I mean, we're working on the divorce."

Holly's spirits sank. She hadn't made up her mind about him, but she didn't want to have the decision yanked away quite so fast. "Kids?"

"Oh yeah. That's what makes it really hard. Jimmy's eight, Emily's six, and Chelsea's four. They're great kids." He reached for his wallet to show her their photos.

They were cute kids and his wife was a looker. Holly wondered how hard they had tried to stay married.

"After Chelsea was born everything started to go wrong." He wanted to spill the whole sad story now. She put a hand on his arm.

"So you're not quite available?"

"Yeah, I am. It's just the kids ...."

"You've got one foot in the marriage, one foot out," Holly guessed.

"Well, yes and no. I've just got a few things to straighten out with her, and then she'll agree to the divorce."

"You're in a hard place, Jim." Holly stood up and brushed off the seat of her jeans.

The tracker waved at them to rejoin the group. Jim put his arm around her shoulders as they stopped to identify a red-tailed hawk soaring overhead. Holly moved slightly away from him, and he didn't try to touch her after that.

On the long drive back, Holly brought up the subject of putting a blade on the front of her pickup and clearing driveways in the winter to earn some extra money. When there was nothing else to say, she asked Jim what he thought of buying a used plow on EBay? That filled up the car with stupid conversation until he pulled up in front of her place.

He was a decent guy to tell her about the situation with the wife and kids. Lots of guys wouldn't. "Keep in touch, Jim, if you ever get things straightened out with your wife."

He nodded sadly at her and reached out to kiss her on the cheek before she got out of the car. As she walked up the path to her house, a gauze of mist rose like breath on the mossy green slopes of the mountain side. A wispy mauve band above the summit streaked across the sky. Above it, the sky was pink tinged with misty gray. Snow weather.

Her thirty-fifth birthday was on the horizon, a make or break year. Focusing on a man--or lack of a man--was probably not the road to take her off the mountain. She hated to admit, even to herself, that she was lonely. She would sooner announce she had syphilis than that she was lonely.

With all these dogs and cats, and a new litter of kittens, where would she have room in her life for a man--or a child-- she said to console herself. What man would put up with all these animals?

He was too good to be true anyway.