

Shingletown Gap

On the snow-covered ridgeline, she found herself thinking about bears, how her partner casually mentioned their predatory nature on the drive to the trail entrance. He calmed her concerns with a *hush, hush, now* and claimed no bears would hurt her. At the top of the ridgeline, she glanced at their path down the mountain, grown over with slick ice and devoid of branches. Avoiding the ice, they opted for snow. She glided down the mountain's blanketed-white sea, snow packing into her boots like a moving truck headed south. She tried to step in the deep holes her partner carved for her ahead, but soon they grew too far apart, and she could barely see his imprints but only the crystallized snow on her eyelashes framing a wooded scene. On her next step, she saw it—a paw print the size of her head. Bending down, she inspected the sharp claw indents, the carvings so pure in their crater. She flattened her gloved hand inside the print, aligning her fingers with each unforgiving claw. *You coming or what?* She heard a voice yell from far below her—her partner. But for a moment, she imagined it was the bear, communicating through the impacted snow. *Yes, she wanted to say. I'll follow you anywhere.*