



Footprints (Rogue Angel Book 20)

By Alex Archer

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But when Annja arrives at the destination, a group of armed thugs warn her to leave the area, and her friend is nowhere to be found. Now the search for Sasquatch turns into a rescue mission, and Annja has only her instincts to guide her in a forest full of predators, scavengers and spirits. And someone, or something, does not want her there....

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Editorial Review

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Annja Creed ducked around another thick pine tree and paused. A cool breeze blew through her hair, which she'd recently had cut, thinking she should take a chance and go for a new look. After her stylist had taken a good six inches off, she realized she'd made a mistake.

"You're always on the go," Rachel said, looking almost guilty. "It's so much easier to take care of it like this, and besides, a lot of guys like short hair."

"Yeah, but I'm not sure I do," Annja said.

Rachel smiled at her and shrugged. "You can always grow it back."

Two days after the haircut, Annja hid out in her Brooklyn loft, desperately wondering how long she could get away with her self-imposed hibernation. She didn't have any urgent commitments and she wasn't due to film another segment of her popular cable television series, *Chasing History's Monsters*, for a few weeks. She realized that having a lot of downtime made her restless and led to rash decisions like ill-advised makeovers. Then the e-mail had arrived that changed her plans and suddenly she was flying out to the Pacific Northwest.

Now she stood in the forest on a trail that the guy who ran the combined gas station and grocery store had assured her would lead all the way to a small encampment hidden deep in the woods.

"Stay on the trail," he'd said sternly. "Don't get off it— whatever happens."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Annja asked.

He'd smiled at her. "That forest is like a maze of pine trees and vines that'll trip you up and suck you under where no one can find you. You stay on the path, you'll be all right. Venture off, and you'll be lucky to be found by next spring."

She could see what he meant. Since parking her rented Jeep at the entrance to the trailhead, she'd had a hard enough time just trying to find the trail itself. It was incredibly overgrown, almost as if the woods themselves were desperate to reclaim it from civilization.

The crack of a branch somewhere behind her caused her to freeze. Was someone coming up the trail behind her?

Annja hadn't gotten the impression that this was a busy recreational hiking area. And the appearance of the trail itself didn't exactly make a convincing argument about its popularity. So who else might be wandering in the woods?

The e-mail Annja had received was from an old friend named Jenny Chu. She and Jenny had taken many undergraduate courses together and their friendship had blossomed over in-depth discussions about

American folklore and legends. Jenny's passion was for things like the Lake Champlain monster and the legends of the Sasquatch.

The Sasquatch legend was why Annja was traipsing through the Oregon woods. Jenny's e-mail suggested that she'd found new evidence of the creature's existence. It was evidence she wanted Annja to see, as well, in case she wanted to do a segment about it on *Chasing History's Monsters*. Annja didn't believe for a second there would be any proof of a giant hairy creature roaming the woods, but her producer, Doug Morrell, was a sucker for those types of stories. Besides, Annja figured, I can buy some time before anyone I know sees my hair.

Annja smirked, thinking about the last time she'd seen Jenny, and their debate. Jenny had gone on and on about how it was anthropologically possible for a giant ape-man to exist in the farthest reaches of the forest of the North American continent.

Annja hadn't been swayed. "You're talking about a missing link, here, Jen. And it's just not possible. Not with the technology we have nowadays. You'd think we could float a satellite over certain areas and just get readings if there was anything there."

Jenny, her hair in two braids with her glasses slung low on her nose, had fired back. "You trust technology way too much. It's not the magic bullet you think it is."

"I don't think it's a magic bullet, per se," Annja said. "Just that we have to acknowledge it could solve mysteries that we've created for ourselves."

"I'll prove you wrong, Annja. One day. You'll see."

Was this the day Jenny had forecast? Annja smiled and started walking again. She'd have to wait and see. Jenny's campsite was supposed to be set up about two miles farther down the trail.

Annja took another five steps and paused again. She didn't hear anything but something didn't feel right.

She turned and looked back the way she'd come. How many times, she wondered, had she suspected that someone had followed her? The feeling was so ingrained that it had become the norm.

Still, she couldn't discount it. Her safety might well be in jeopardy. It often was these days. And that meant she'd have to take precautions.

The words of the gnarled shopkeeper rang in her ears. "Stick to the trail."

Annja frowned. If she stuck to the trail, there was a good chance that whoever or whatever was following her would overtake her.

Whatever?

She caught the mental slip and frowned. Was she already supposing that some giant creature might be tailing her? She chuckled. It couldn't be helped. Despite the sunny start to the day, bloated clouds had moved in, threatening to drench the forest below. The forest itself had gone quiet, almost as if the animals and insects knew what was coming.

Or did they?

One thing was certain—if Annja didn't make some progress and reach the campsite, she was going to get soaked to the bone and face the threat of hypothermia. Even though the day was relatively warm, it was still early spring and she knew that temperatures could fluctuate rapidly. In the space of a few hours, alone, wet and cold, Annja could easily become disoriented and disappear. Unfortunately, she knew such things happened all the time.

Not the best way to start off the trip, she decided.

Ahead of her, she spotted what looked like a redwood tree, its massive trunk almost too large to even attempt to hug. It's been here for hundreds upon hundreds of years, Annja thought. Too bad Jenny can't ask the tree what lives here. I'll bet it could clear up the whole big-foot mystery right quick.

She walked around the tree, marveling at the sheer size of it, its branches reaching toward the heavens.

Fantastic, she thought. This alone was worth the trip.

She heard the noise as a twig snapped again, about thirty yards back.

Annja whirled. I need cover, she thought.

Another twig cracked. She spotted a clump of bushes and ducked toward it, squeezing her tall frame under the overhang until she could just about peer out from under the foliage.

She sensed movement farther back on the path. Was it the creature Jenny had been hunting for?

Or something else entirely?

She spotted a set of boots and relaxed somewhat. The last she'd heard, the Sasquatch didn't wear trendy hiking boots. The feet were moving along at a casual pace. There wasn't any sense of menace.

Annja poked her head out from under the bush and heard a shout of surprise.

The hiking boots belonged to a boy of about fourteen. His jet-black hair spiked out of his head at odd angles and he toppled back, landing on his butt as he reacted with shock to seeing Annja's head emerge from the bush.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Annja climbed to her feet. "Sorry about that. I thought someone might be following me."

The boy frowned. "You always go around hiding in blueberry bushes?"

Annja shrugged. "I've been known to hide in Dumpsters, too. Trees, sand dunes, snow caves. You name it, I've done it."

She helped him to his feet. "Who are you?"

"Joey," he said easily.

Annja smiled. "Nice to meet you."

He frowned. "That's some haircut you got there. You pay someone to do that or did you hack it off yourself?"

Annja frowned. "She took too much off. I wanted a change, but not this much."

Joey smirked. "Well, I think it looks killer."

Annja laughed. "Thanks. So where are you heading with that backpack stuffed as it is?"

Joey pointed down the trail. "I'm spending my vacation working for an expedition that's camped farther in. I get to hang out, run some errands and see what they're up to."

"That wouldn't be Jenny Chu's expedition, would it?"

Joey nodded. "Yeah. You know her?"

"She's an old friend of mine. She asked me to come out here and see what she was up to."

Joey's eyes went wide. "You're Annja Creed?"

"Guilty."

Joey frowned. "Wow, you don't look anything like you do on television."

"Yeah, well I didn't bother going to hair and makeup before hiking through the woods. I wasn't expecting to run into any fans," she said, winking. "How about you showing me exactly where the camp is? Those clouds look as if they're going to open up any second and I don't want to be out here when it pours."

"No sweat, Annja. Follow me."

Joey hefted his pack and set off. Annja followed along behind him. "You know this area well?" she asked.

Joey shrugged. "This is the land of my ancestors. We've been around here longer than anyone else."

Annja nodded. "You made a lot of noise on the trail back there. Might be time to study the skills of your ancestors."

Joey stopped walking. "What are you talking about?"

"On the trail. I heard you coming a mile away. Lots of twigs snapping, that kind of thing. Not very stealthy, huh?"

"Lady, I move pretty quiet. I don't know what you heard, but it wasn't me. They don't call me Creeping Wolf for nothing."

Annja frowned. "If I didn't hear you, then what—"

Joey held up his hand. "Let's not even go there, okay?

No offense to your friend or anything, but she's kind of obsessed with the whole Sasquatch thing, you know? I can dig having an interest and all, but she's really going full speed into nut job."

Annja smiled. "That sounds like Jenny."

"It's cool," Joey said. "I get that way about things. Girls, mostly. But you have to know when to draw the line at becoming a lunatic."

"Good advice."

The trail started to descend into what looked like a valley. Annja could see the trees starting to part as they entered a clearing. Ahead of her, she saw the bright reds and yellows of tents.

"So there it is," she said.

Joey nodded. "I've been gone all day. I had to go back to town and get some more supplies."

"Did you drive?"

Joey looked at her. "I walked."

"Yeah, but town's six miles away."

"And?"

Annja raised her eyebrows. "Nothing. Never mind."

Joey smiled. "Like I said, I've been cruising these woods my whole life. I know them better than almost anyone else. And as the crow flies, the distance back to town is only three miles."

"You fly, too?"

"Sometimes that's exactly what it feels like."

They broke out of the forest and into the clearing. Joey walked ahead of Annja, leaving her to take in the camp.

It was strangely quiet.

"Joey."

He stopped. "What?"

Annja frowned. "Where is everyone?"

Joey turned and glanced around. They both stood for a moment, taking in the fact that there seemed to be absolutely no noise anywhere in the camp. Overhead, the clouds jostled together and Annja felt the first few drops of rain starting to flick down at her.

She felt uneasy and turned to see the barrel of a gun aiming at her.

The man standing behind the rifle did not look very friendly.

"How nice. Another guest," he said.

Annja turned to warn Joey, but he had vanished.

Startled, Annja turned back to the man. He was looking her up and down and then he nodded. "Walk that way. Try anything funny and I'll be more than happy to put a couple of holes into you."

Annja turned and started moving. One of these days, she thought, I'm going to have to find a deserted island. Maybe then I can get away from everyone who wants to kill me.

Annja felt the rifle barrel jab into her spine for the third time. She risked a glance back at the man standing behind her. "That's not necessary. I'm perfectly capable of walking without you stabbing me with your gun every few seconds," she said angrily.

"Shut up and walk."

Annja glanced around the camp as he escorted her past the tents. Everything seemed to be in good order and there wasn't an air of chaos. Annja wondered if the guy with the rifle had surprised Jenny's camp. She also wondered if he was alone.

She found the answer to that question when they turned the corner and she saw two other men similarly armed. One of them looked at Annja's escort.

"Where'd she come from?"

"She's been on the trail leading here. I followed her for a few miles."

"Noisily, I might add," Annja said.

"Sit her down with the others."

Annja felt the jab of the rifle barrel again and sat down.

Jenny's expedition consisted of a number of college students—an even mix of boys and girls who looked quite frightened.

But where was Jenny?

Annja watched as the three armed men huddled together and spoke for a few seconds. They parted and the one who seemed to be in charge, a guy of maybe forty with thick pork-chop sideburns and a long scar down one side of his face, nodded at her. "You."

"What?" she asked.

"Stand up."

Annja tensed. Were they going to shoot her now? She closed her eyes and pictured the powerful sword she'd inherited from Joan of Arc. The weapon was ready for her to call forth. She knew her timing would have to be perfect.

Annja stood and asked, "What's this all about?"

"Shut up. We've got a message for the professor."

Annja frowned. So this wasn't just some random occurrence. These guys wanted to speak to Jenny. But what had happened to her?

"What's the message?"

The man leveled a finger at Annja. "Tell her to back off. She's not wanted here. These woods belong to us. And we'll do whatever it takes to keep it that way."

Annja wanted to argue, but decided it would be better to just accept things and try to figure out what was going on once the danger had passed. "Okay. I'll give her the message."

"You do that. And tell her we'll be watching. If we don't like what we see, then bad things will start happening."

Annja nodded. "I get it."

The lead man regarded her for one more second and then turned. The three men walked toward the trees that bordered the clearing. In minutes, they had vanished back into the gloom.

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