

The Camber

P.E. Rowe

The summer before Lacy and Marcus Brathmore were married, they met on the northernmost stretch of the Appalachian Trail while Marcus was thru-hiking. They kept bumping into each other at trail huts and eventually started walking together, as they hiked at roughly the same pace and enjoyed each other's company. Lacy would never have attempted these sections of the Trail without the support of her hiking club, and perhaps it was for this reason she found Marc's adventurous spirit so alluring. For Lacy, a city girl from birth, nature was a spectacle of beauty to be observed with caution, and it was a refuge from the bustle of city life, albeit a dangerous one. For Marc, a Denver weekend adventurer, the mountains were that constant wall on his suburban Colorado horizon, always looming and waiting to be tamed. Marc's projection of confidence had given Lacy the courage she needed to separate from her hiking group and walk all the way from the Berkshires to Katahdin with her future husband.

On their honeymoon, Lacy and Marc had taken a ten-day, guided, glacial climb culminating at Mont Blanc. Lacy spent most of the climb pestering the guides with nervous questions about crevasses and avalanches, but was ecstatic about the reaction she got to the adventurous-looking honeymoon pictures she posted on social media. Marcus spent much of the climb talking with Gilbert, one of their mountaineering guides, about the Frenchman's expeditions to remote Andean peaks seldom conquered by man. That was where Marc had gotten the idea to plan a trek of

their own to Chile. In February, Marc and Lacy followed the Alpine trip with another guided climb, this time to the summit of Kilimanjaro, to help them prepare for an altitude climb. This late-August trip to the East Kessuck Range was their third big expedition since the wedding, and the Kessucks were supposed to help them prepare for the long stretches of isolated wilderness they'd encounter in the Andes that fall—their final big expedition before settling down to raise a family.

This Canadian trek was their first venture into the wilderness without some form of professional support, and for this reason, Lacy was nervous. The Kessucks only reached above nine thousand feet at a few summits, but in terms of isolation, this rugged area of British Columbia was every bit as untamed as the wildest parts of the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, or the remotest stretches of glacial Alaska. Some of the Kessucks' desolate gray peaks were named for the Pantheon of Greek gods—a Hermes, a Hestia, a Demeter. When the cartographers ran out of Greek gods, they simply gave the mountains numbers on a grid.

Marc and Lacy's main destination, Persephone, lay seventy miles south of their access point at mile 398 of the Alaska Highway. The remoteness of this territory wasn't the only reason for Lacy's building concern. As they researched the area, Lacy had pointed out to Marc that the Alaska Highway ran parallel to British Columbia's famed Highway of Tears. As many as forty murders in that area of the Province still remained unsolved. Upon reading about the murders, Marc was quick to point out that most

of the victims were female hitchhikers traveling alone on the highway. They would be in the woods together where no one could possibly bother them. Lacy was reluctant, but again, it was Marc's projection of absolute confidence that allowed her to set aside her misgivings and follow him into the wilderness once more.

Marc and Lacy began day two of their trek skirting the base of peak M5-58. This was where the full reality of their isolation began to set in for Lacy. Between the two of them there was a can of bear spray, and Marc had a hunting knife velcroed to his right pantleg. Lacy realized just how meager those defenses were when they startled a group of seven bison grazing in a high meadow about thirty yards beneath the scree field they were traversing. The dull, echoing timbre of the bison's alarm-call served notice to the whole valley that people were here, in their place. This was not Colorado—not the foothills, not the Front Range—and from that moment on, Lacy was more hesitant with each next step, each rocky mile, each unspoken word, moving them farther into the Canadian wilderness.

"I told you we should've brought the gun," Lacy said.

They were the first words either of them had uttered in a half hour, and the sound of her voice seemed so unnatural against the silence between their steady footfalls.

"We're fine, Lacy," Marc answered. "How many times have we had this conversation before a hike?"

"That was in Fort Collins."

"Don't worry," he said, turning to reassure her with a confident look.

That look lasted barely long enough for Marc to see that Lacy was still behind him; it certainly wasn't long enough to regard the ever-building fear that had rooted itself in her consciousness.

Hours later, at the peak of a 7,500-foot crag the map labeled The Camber, Marc decided they could make their descent across a lower ridge. On the map it seemed passable, and after a quick look through the binoculars, Lacy agreed, as much because it promised to cut off two miles from their descent to an abandoned hunting camp, where they planned to pass the night.

Lacy stood beside Marc as he sat on a rock, leafing through the guidebook for the Kessucks and Muskwas, and after a few moments of scanning, Marcus began to read:

"The Camber's southern ridge drops down in two progressive arcs that give the larger peak its name. The wider top section, known as Bear Ridge, drops off at pitches over forty degrees to the eastern and western sides; whereas the lower, Little Bear Ridge, forms a knife edge, with the western side dropping off fifty degrees against a nearly-vertical eastern cliff-face. Both are passable in light weather and offer stunning panoramas of the Pantheon to the south but are not for the faint of heart."

As Marc lifted his eyes from the page, he said, "I'd say we can hack it. What do you say, Lacy?"

She shrugged and looked out at the long ridge shaking her head. Marc stood, tucking the book and the map into the top pouch of his pack.

"Why don't you lead," he said.

Lacy took a deep breath and pressed onward.

By the time they'd crossed the upper section of the ridge an hour later, the weather was starting to fold in on them. The breeze was constant, and had grown in stature from pleasant to forceful. The gray of the clouds had lowered from an overcast high cover and was starting to make itself present in wisps and drifts of fog. Small clouds passed before them and beside them close enough to catch their attention, even transfixed as their eyes were on the rocky ridge where the hikers set their feet.

When they got to the lower section, Little Bear Ridge looked different to Lacy. The higher bowed ridge was broad enough for two bold hikers to pass side by side. But here, it was only wide enough to pass single-file, and with great caution.

Lacy stopped as the ridge narrowed. "I don't know about this, Marcus."

She looked around and then down the eastern side—only open air and a thousand-foot drop to the valley below.

"You'll be fine, Lacy. I'll be right behind you."

"But the wind, Marc?"

"Honey, this is no different than Katahdin, and you were a rock star that day."

"It wasn't windy."

"Honey," he said. "We'll be fine."

"I don't want to do this, Marc."

"Lacy, the weather's coming in, honey, and we need to drop altitude. We're talking seven miles back around, and it's almost four o'clock."

"How long did the map say the ridge is?"

“It’s a little less than the upper ridge. Two-tenths at most, honey. You can do it. I’ll be right behind you the whole way.”

Lacy had hiked enough to know that two-tenths of a mile was three hundred fifty yards – about seven hundred steps. In her mind, she broke down the long traverse into sections of fifty steps each, ready to celebrate as she put each section behind her. Lacy turned, paused for a moment to regard the sharp ridge, and took a breath before stepping out. She held her arms slightly away from her body like a tightrope walker and moved forward, one deliberate step before the next.

Lacy was counting her sixth section of fifty steps when it started raining – nothing heavy, but enough moisture to stick to the rock, making every precarious step that much more questionable. Each slow, deliberate movement became a decision, a calculation of just how far in front of her body she could space the next step without risking a fatal slip of a sole.

When the wind picked up three-quarters of the way across the ridge, she knew crossing the knife edge had been a bad call. She was bent, almost bracing, anticipating a sliding boot or a loose piece of shale to fall away and carry her with it.

“You’re doing great, Lacy,” Marc kept saying. “We’re almost there.”

It was near yard two-fifty when a sudden wind gust swept Lacy to the rock face. She sensed the blast of wind right at the crucial second and was able to brace herself, almost overcompensating, so that when she realized what

had happened, Lacy knew she'd leaned too heavily away from the eastern cliff, favoring a ragged battering to a pure thousand-foot plummet. She found herself sprawled flat against the wet rock face and slipping, scraping her fingernails against solid shale to try and keep her sliding body from accelerating. She tried to plant her chest, her knees, even her face against the rock to arrest the slide, but she couldn't stop her downward momentum. Lacy shrieked.

"Find a foothold," Lacy heard Marcus's voice above her.

"Help me! Pull me up!"

All she could hear was the wind and the wet kiss of her bootsoles sliding over the rock beneath her, unable to find purchase. As Lacy continued to slide, she managed to grasp a rock projection about the size and shape of a lampshade. She wrapped her left arm around the rock, and somehow, she managed to fight against the strap of her backpack enough to get her right arm around the wet rock as well. There was a pungent smell of damp, earthy dirt out on this ledge. She hugged that tiny piece of mountain with the whole force of her life, but still, Lacy knew she wasn't strong enough to pull herself up from there. She couldn't see the ridge above her.

"Marcus!"

"I'm trying to get to you. Find a foothold and stay calm."

"I'm going to fall!"

"You're not going to fall," he said. "Hold on till I get there."

"I can't see you."

"I'm coming to you, Lacy," he said.

Over the wind and her frantic breathing, Lacy could just barely hear the sound of Marc's pants scratching across the surface of the rock as he struggled to slide toward her. She didn't think he would reach her in time. Then she heard his voice to her left.

"There's a foothold," Marc said. "Your left boot. Slide it up the rock, honey, about twelve inches and about two inches to the right."

Lacy raised her knee toward her chest, feeling out each slippery inch of the rock's surface with her boot, searching for some sort of purchase.

"Good," Marc said. "Up a little more."

It grabbed. Lacy found the foothold, and a handhold took her back within a few yards of the ridge. Marc pulled her to the sharp apex with a final tug on the top of her pack.

They crawled the final hundred yards in rain and howling wind, and in all of it, Lacy was most grateful that her kneecaps waited until the adrenaline had worn off before telling her what they thought of a bare, hundred-yard crawl on shale with fifty pounds of gear strapped to her back.

When they got off the ridge and stood, Marc gave Lacy a strange look she interpreted as part apology, part 'glad that's over with', part shrug, and part smile.

"We better get down," Marc said, and he was still hiking, still moving on, thinking that this moment would simply get left behind them on that ridge.

In the wind and the rain, exposed on the lower section of The Camber, Lacy couldn't see the use in a fight. But she decided that when the sun rose the following morning,

Marcus Brathmore was walking her out of those mountains, or he was finding himself another wife.

Despite their rain gear, Lacy and Marc were soaked by the time they got down to the abandoned hunting camp. Lacy was so soggy and miserable that she couldn't even consider a conversation with Marc about what had happened on the ridge. She wanted a fire, dinner, and the warmth of her sleeping bag where she could pretend she was back in bed in Fort Collins.

There wasn't much inside the old cabin but an old woodstove. The structure predated the recently-formed Kessuck Provincial Park, but was in good shape considering its age and the remoteness of the location. The roof and the wooden floor were still intact, as were the two front windows and the solid wooden door. Apart from the cast-iron stove and the cabinets, the cabin was completely empty. Either the Provincial Park caretakers had cleaned it out or cold mountaineers like them had burned all the furniture and taken anything useful for their journeys. Lacy was just grateful to be spending the night with four walls around her, even if those walls were over forty miles from civilization.

After Marc started the fire, they watered their MREs and waited for dinner to warm up. Marc went out to the nearby stream to fetch more water while Lacy sat cross-legged on her sleeping bag. It was one of those strange moments of solitude. The rain had slowed to a subtle tapping on the roof, and the heat from the old cast-iron stove was starting

to radiate through Lacy's soggy clothes, almost as though she'd put on a sweater hot from the dryer that hadn't quite finished drying. She wondered what kind of man had dragged that stove into these mountains. It had to weigh four hundred pounds. She thought it must've been the same kind of man willing to chop down a different trunk for each of the fifty-or-so logs composing the cabin walls. That man's work all those years ago was the only thing providing Lacy with any sense of security out in this wilderness. This cabin, she decided, was from a different era with different men.

"What the hell are you doing in these mountains, Lacy?" she said. And she didn't have a chance to answer her own question, as she heard Marc's footsteps approaching the cabin.

He came in and dropped purifying tablets in all the Nalgene bottles he'd filled. They ate, mostly in silence. Lacy didn't know how she would tell him. She had thought she'd be able to do this, to manage her fear. But this was different from anything they'd ever done, and she understood deep down that it was too much for either of them. She could tell by the encouraging smile Marcus kept flashing toward her that he didn't understand. Marc was using that same smile she fell in love with, only now it seemed like a tool to prod her to places she was uncomfortable going. Lacy decided it would be best to let him sleep on it—to let both of their emotions settle before delivering any ultimatums. It was still somewhat light outside when they finally lay down for the night. Lacy turned her back to the stove and Marc followed her,

leaning over her shoulder, kissing her temple just above Lacy's ear and whispering, "You did great today, honey. It'll get better tomorrow. I promise."

"Yes, it will," Lacy said, but she didn't think he caught her meaning.

Lacy awoke in the night to pure darkness. Something had startled her, but she wasn't sure what, and she wasn't sure whether it had been a dream. Marc was breathing heavily, almost snoring. Even so, Lacy thought she could hear something large approaching the cabin. After a few seconds, she heard a branch snap, and the noise was getting closer.

"Marc," she whispered, shaking his shoulder to wake him. "There's an animal outside. I think it's a bear."

He raised his head for a moment to listen, but there was only silence.

"It'll go away, honey. It won't bother us," Marc said, putting his head down again.

She pushed his chest. "Listen!"

After a few seconds, they could both hear something large moving a few yards outside the cabin. Marc lifted his head again, looking at the front windows of the cabin.

"It's a person," he said.

"How do you know?"

"Bears don't have headlamps," he said.

Lacy looked at the window again, and now she could see an unnatural iridescent glow getting brighter as the light caught the dust on the windowpane.

“Hello, out there!” Marc shouted, opening up his sleeping bag and getting up from the floor.

Almost as he said it, there was a loud succession of footsteps ascending the wooden stairs, followed by three strong knocks that shook the wooden door.

Marc flicked on their little battery lantern and approached the door. Lacy got up and was standing a few feet behind him, looking over his shoulder when the door swung open.

There was an outline of a huge man, standing four inches taller than Marc and nearly as wide at the shoulders as the doorway. In the dim light, it was difficult for Lacy to see, but she noticed the man’s frazzled appearance first—his long, unkempt beard, sweat pouring off his forehead, and the most intense pair of eyes, squinting to look through the glow of Marc’s lantern. To Lacy, it appeared he was carrying something other than a pack over his shoulders—like the way a hunter this man’s size might carry a small deer on his back. And he was holding his hands unnaturally. Lacy was observing his right hand when she saw the outline of a gun on the man’s belt. The man stood in the doorway, waiting for Marc to say something, but Marc didn’t say a word—he seemed frozen, as though uncertain what to do.

“My name is Russell Eldridge,” the man said. “I’m afraid I need to ask for your assistance.”

Marc stepped forward with the light, and Russell’s hand came into focus for Lacy: it wasn’t clutching a deer’s leg as she’d suspected, but another hand—a purple hand, and as Lacy looked over the man’s other shoulder, she followed a

dangling leg down to Russell's belt where a boot seemed to float in the air. At his left shoulder, Lacy could see a pony-tail, and the limp, lifeless head of a young woman hung there, caked in dark-red, dried blood.

Lacy screamed at the shock of the sight, startling her husband.

"Lacy!" Marc said, turning around to calm her. "Shh, honey. Shh. It's all right."

"Please, I'm sorry," Lacy heard Russell's deep voice in the doorway. "I don't mean to frighten you."

Lacy began fumbling in the darkness for the bear spray. She became aware of how loud and fast her breathing was. Marc came over and put his hand around her back and on her head.

"It's okay, Lacy," he said. "Shh."

Russell was standing deadly still in the doorway. In that moment, Lacy couldn't begin to piece together his intentions or what could've happened to bring this man to this camp in the middle of the night carrying the battered body of a dead girl. Lacy had never seen a dead body before – not outside of a casket with its hands crossed in solemnity – certainly never one limp and bloody like this.

After a few moments of silence, Russell said, "She took a fall."

"Is there anything we can do?" Marc asked.

"I'm afraid it's too late," he answered, and there was almost no emotion in his voice.

"I understand," Marc said. "But I mean –"

"Sorry, I misunderstood," Russell said. "Perhaps we should talk outside."

Marc kissed Lacy on the forehead. "Everything's all right," he said. "Trust me."

Lacy's hands were trembling. She wondered how Marc could think this was okay. This was how horror movies started. She considered whether she was just overreacting because of the sudden shock of this man's appearance, or maybe it was the solitude, but she began to think of the highway murders again—how easy it was to make someone disappear in this vast country. She fumbled in her pack to find the bear spray and slid it into her sleeping bag. Lacy could hear their voices outside, but she couldn't make out what they were saying—except she heard Marc say, "Oh, God. Oh, God. That's terrible," and then after Russell's deeper voice had mumbled a few sentences, Marc said, "Of course. Of course."

The door opened. It was Marc, and he walked over to Lacy and whispered, "Russell's going to stay with us tonight, and tomorrow we're going to help him carry his girlfriend out."

She whispered, "Marc, what the hell is going on? A guy walks up here in the middle of the night carrying a dead body and you invite him in?"

"It's his girlfriend, Lacy. What are we supposed to do? Think if it were us. You'd want someone to help us. We have to help this guy."

Marc told Lacy what Russell had said—that his girlfriend had lost her footing in the storm while hurrying to the cover of the trees; that she had fallen down a thirty foot cliff; that he was heading for a fire road about twenty miles to the west when he saw the smoke from their camp;

that he'd only been able to make four miles in fourteen hours by himself; that he needed help to carry her body home.

Lacy thought about the gun on Russell's belt, and that even if there weren't a gun on Russell's belt he was still twice Marc's size. Even if Marc had wanted to, it wasn't like he could refuse to help. And this fire road twenty miles away, Lacy thought—that was a way out of this God-forsaken wilderness. She relented.

"Come on in, Russell," Marc said.

He stepped sideways through the doorway and set the body of the woman on the floor beneath one of the windows. Lacy slid into her sleeping bag, clutching the bear spray, and she swore she wouldn't sleep a minute that night. She heard the sound of boots on the wooden floorboards in the far corner. That sound was the last thing she remembered that night.

It was gray when Lacy awoke to a start. She felt someone shaking her shoulder. It was Marcus. She looked at her watch. Four-thirty—even in August, it was a cold, inhuman hour to be waking in the wilderness. Russell looked to have been up for some time, as he'd already transformed his tent into a sort of nylon cocoon for the body, and he was working to fashion two long tree branches into a makeshift stretcher for him and Marc to carry. In the dull gray light, Lacy could see him better than the night before. He had his sleeves rolled up, and she couldn't help but notice the defined muscular lines of his forearms—the kind of wiry

muscle that gets made in the mountains, not in the gym. Every movement Russell made was sharp, not rushed, but precise – nothing wasted. He was splicing line, tying knots, working to secure the body to the tree branches, moving systematically from top to bottom. There was something cold and unsettling about this man that bothered Lacy, like he was somehow far too comfortable with death at his fingertips.

“We’ll need to move soon,” Russell said to Marc.

Marc nodded and looked over at Lacy as if to prod her from the sleeping bag. He was emptying their backpacks. Lacy asked Marcus what he was doing.

“Prioritizing,” he said. “If we’re carrying the stretcher, you’re going to have to carry most of the gear. I’ll try and make things as light as I can.”

Lacy watched Marc as he pulled all the gear from her bag. She looked over at Russell again. Lacy couldn’t help but think that he must have done the same thing the previous day. Apart from his tent, a sleeping bag, a canteen, and the headlamp, Russell had nothing but the clothes on his back and the weapons. Now Marcus was reloading her pack with the essentials.

“Come on, honey,” Marc said. “Get up.”

Lacy looked back at Marcus and at her pack, which was already bulging at the seams.

“How heavy is that, Marcus?”

“It’s the water bottles, a layer of clothing for each of us, the tent, my sleeping bag, three days of food for each of us, and the guide book. Everything else we can come back for when we get Russell out.”

"How heavy?" she said.

"I can't find the bear spray," he said.

"I have it," Lacy whispered, only moving her lips – barely an audible sound.

Marc looked over at Russell, who'd chosen that exact moment to look over at them. He turned away as Lacy looked at him. He decided to re-tie the knot he'd just done. There was a long silence in the cabin. Lacy sat up and put on her boots, trying to ignore the soreness in her legs and shoulders. After another minute or so, she stood.

"Almost ready?" Russell said. "We need to get moving."

Marc stuffed the rest of the clothes, gear, and probably two weeks' worth of provisions into Lacy's sleeping bag, hiding everything in the back corner of the cabin. He helped lift Lacy's pack onto her shoulders. She guessed it was twenty pounds heavier than what she was used to carrying. A minute later, the couple was outside the protective shell of the cabin and into the wilderness, trusting a strange man with a gun and a dead body to bring them from the wild expanse to some fire road neither of them had even seen on the map.

Russell said nothing to them that morning except to give commands or directions. His emotionless exterior left Lacy wondering what kind of man could lose his girlfriend that suddenly, in such a fashion, and then walk her body from the wilderness without so much as a troubled sigh. Lacy welcomed the time they spent struggling to climb: from the back, there was no chance of catching those steely gray eyes

or having to fake a sympathetic smile. And when Russell stopped to give her and Marc a rest, there was always this — his hands resting on each hip, his right hand casually on the butt of the gun while he cast a long empty stare at the landscape.

By late afternoon, Russell was losing patience with Marc, who'd needed to break more and more for water as the day progressed. Lacy could see Marc's legs shaking beneath him as he struggled with the cumbersome weight of the body swinging between the stretcher's two branches.

It was nearing five o'clock when Marc said, "I can't go much farther, Russell. My legs are dead, my arms are dead, and my hands are killing me. I'm doing my best, bu —"

"We can stop to eat," Russell said. "But we need to keep moving after."

"I can't do it, bud. I'm sorry, but we can't help you if we collapse from exhaustion."

"We'll stop at the next water and eat," Russell replied.

By that point, it was clear to Lacy who was in charge. When they finally stopped again about fifteen minutes later, Marc and Russell set the stretcher down for the first time in hours. Marc looked up at Lacy as he flexed his hands, rubbing them together and perhaps, she thought, expressing some of the same doubts and fears she'd been processing since they first heard this man breaking through the bushes outside the hunting camp. Marc was the only one to express any fatigue, but he spoke for Lacy as well. She wasn't wrestling with the awkward, swinging weight of a body, but the added weight in her pack was enough.

Add to that the three straight days of hiking, and it was all taking its toll.

Marc filled their water bottles, dropping purification tablets in each, and after a few minutes, he watered an MRE for himself and Lacy. No one spoke as they ate. Russell was in earshot, but sat away from them, staring out into the distance. Every now and again, Russell would scratch his beard with his left hand and then take a large gulp of water. His silence seemed to grow more ominous by the minute. After he'd eaten, he got up and looked at Marc and Lacy.

"Drink up," he said. "And I'll fill the bottles again before we go."

Marc started to speak up, "Russell we're exha—"

"I grew up in these mountains," Russell said. "I've been mountaineering my whole life—all over the world. I've taken myself to the brink of exhaustion before, and I've seen other men go all the way. You may not know what you're capable of, but I do. And I can assure you, Marc, you've got a lot more to give tonight."

Marc shook his head, but didn't argue.

"How much farther," Lacy asked him.

"We've done about thirteen miles today. We need to put at least another two behind us tonight, because the final six before the fire road will be the toughest. We'll need to be out of the woods by nightfall tomorrow."

"Why is that so important?"

"There are wolves out here," Russell said. "If they're not following us already, they will be."

He looked over at the stretcher, but Lacy couldn't tell what that look meant. It seemed to carry no emotion but

was more to direct their eyes toward the body, and then it dawned on Lacy. That was Russell's way of telling them that they were carrying a pretty good meal. And that—just the thought that a man could think that way about his girlfriend so soon—Lacy had no idea what to think. Russell took their empty water bottles and walked about twenty yards to the stream.

"This guy scares the shit out of me, Marcus," she whispered when Russell had gone.

"What?" he said. "What are you talking about, honey?"

"Ordering us around with his hand on his gun, telling you he's pushed men to exhaustion, talking about the wolves following us? What the hell are we doing here?"

"We're doing the right thing, Lacy."

Again, she wondered, like she did up on the ridge.

"Marcus?" she whispered.

Marc just shook his head and waved his hand at her, gesturing for Lacy to drop it. She stared at him, hoping for something, insisting on one single word or at the very least a reassuring glance to acknowledge her fear. Marcus shook his head again and stood up.

When Russell returned, he stopped for a moment beside the body, looking down at the shape of her—mummified there in that blue-teal nylon, all knotted-up between two dead branches. It was impossible for Lacy to tell if there was any emotion behind those heavy gray eyes of his. He crouched and set down the water bottle he was clutching in his right hand. Russell put his empty palm over the dead woman's face, resting it there for a few moments in one of the most mysterious gestures Lacy had ever witnessed—

neither tender nor rough. Right on her face he held his hand, and then, inexplicably, without ceremony or any sign of prayer or emotion, he stood.

“We need to go,” he said, nodding at Marc.

And immediately, Lacy and Marc stood and prepared to walk until Russell told them it was time to stop.

They made camp around eight o'clock with enough light left in the day for Russell and Marc to gather wood for a fire. Lacy set up the tent and fetched water, always keeping in sight of the men. They'd spent the final hours of that exhausting day bombarded with the cries of the elk in rut. They were ghostly, guttural sounds, echoing up the sides of the mountains for miles. And if those sounds weren't troubling enough to Lacy, she couldn't help but hear Russell's cold voice in her mind repeating, “There are wolves out here.” Every time it got quiet, she got the sense she was being watched.

Lacy hurried back to the camp with the water, wondering if they'd been giving the purification tablets enough time to work. She was starting to feel hot and sick to her stomach, and as exhausted as she was, she couldn't even think about eating.

Marcus and Russell were breaking up the branches they'd gathered. Lacy sat in the tent, listening to see if a single word would pass between them, and none did until she heard the crackle of the flames beginning to rise and the hissing of green firewood.

Finally, Marc said, "We can take shifts to keep the fire going, Russell. You can have the tent while Lacy and I sit up."

"That's kind of you," Russell said. "But it's not necessary. I'll stay by the fire. You two sleep."

A few minutes later, Marc unzipped the front of the tent and poked his head inside.

"Eat something before you fall asleep, Lacy," he said.

"I must've had some bad water," she said. "I'd only throw it up."

"A power bar or something?"

"No," Lacy said, and she slipped off to sleep, only awakening slightly when Marc crawled into the sleeping bag with her.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Lacy awoke with a terrible feeling of uneasiness. She sensed an energy, beyond Marc, beyond the warmth of the fire, and beyond the coldness of Russell beside it. She still didn't feel well. Marc's body heat was making her sweat, and his smell after these three days—all that exertion—it was nauseating. Lacy crawled out of the sleeping bag and looked through the screen toward the fire. The orange light of the flames were illuminating Russell's ghostly profile as he stared out into the woods as though entranced by the darkness.

Lacy unzipped the screen and poked her head out.

Russell turned his head.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I have to pee," Lacy whispered.

He just shook his head no, and right at that moment Lacy heard the long arcing howl of a wolf. A second wolf answered, much closer, maybe less than a hundred yards. Russell looked over at Lacy, her head sticking halfway out the tent.

“How bad do you have to pee?” he whispered.

“Not nearly that bad,” she whispered back.

“Good girl,” Russell said. “Go back and get your rest. I got you now.”

Lacy couldn’t decide which thought was more troubling, the thought of a wolf prowling a hundred yards from their tent or that last sentence—the idea that Russell Eldridge had her.

When Russell woke them up, again in the early gray of the late-August morning, Lacy felt hot and nauseous. Before they broke camp, Lacy managed to choke down about half an MRE and some dried apricots without vomiting. She felt absolutely drained of energy, and they hadn’t even taken a step.

All morning, as they struggled through thick undergrowth, Lacy continued to feel sick. With each step her thoughts grew darker and darker. She kept looking at Marc, wondering how this strange man had coaxed more urgency out of him in thirty-six hours than she’d been able to in the three-year length of their relationship. Lacy noticed something in the way Marc looked at Russell and followed his commands. This man embodied everything Marcus longed to be—the powerful, solitary man against

the wilderness, the conqueror of mountains. The more they followed, the more obvious it became that Marcus would never be such a man. He could barely hold up the lighter foot-end of the stretcher. He stumbled several times, slipping into the bushes before getting up again with his strained legs shaking beneath him. He kept grunting in exhaustion, all the while Russell seemed calm, barely breaking a sweat. Lacy began to wonder what Marc would've done if she'd let go on The Camber. Would Mark even have made an attempt to carry her out like Russell had carried his girlfriend?

And Russell? Lacy couldn't reconcile how the coldness of his stoic exterior could possibly belie the kind of love and dedication that would compel a man to carry his girlfriend's dead body over such an impossible expanse. It was hard for her not to wonder whether Russell could have pushed her. And then—who would think to ask the man any questions after this? It was a clever design for a murder, she thought. How could a man make himself appear any more innocent than by carrying his girlfriend's body home against impossible odds? She could imagine just such a calculation in those steely eyes.

"Honey," Marc's voice cut into her thoughts. "You doing okay back there?"

Lacy couldn't remember a single time the whole trip he'd bothered to ask her that question—days and days, through all of this.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just fine."

After several more hours of grueling climbs and treacherous descents, they stopped for lunch, and Lacy

managed to eat a few bites despite her nausea and what she decided was the faint but detectable odor of the young woman's body in the early stages of decomposition. It didn't seem to bother the men. If they hadn't been too exhausted to talk, Lacy reckoned they still wouldn't have uttered a word.

As they got up again, Russell said, "We'll be to the road in a couple hours now."

That was all the motivation Lacy needed to get to the end. A few hours later, the trail broke out of the wilderness onto the fire road, which rivaled any Lacy had ever seen in Colorado for ruggedness. Russell mentioned that it was almost forty miles to Tettichuk.

"Tettichuk?" Lacy said. "That's to the south."

"Where did you think we were going?" Russell said.

"I thought the fire road came out to the Highway. I thought you were going to drop us at our car."

"Road only goes south to Tettichuk," Russell said. "I can take you there."

"Give us a moment please, Russell," Lacy said.

Russell nodded and got in the driver's seat of his truck. Lacy walked to the edge of the woods with Marc.

"So what was your plan, Marcus? Did you know he couldn't take us to the car?"

"It's like a six hour drive from here, honey. It's going to take him two hours just to get to the town. This fire road isn't exactly I-70."

"What are we supposed to do then? Did you actually expect me to go back into these mountains?"

"Well, yeah. We left all our gear back at the camp."

“The gear?”

“Yeah, honey. The gear. You remember – yesterday?”

Lacy looked at the woods – the abominable nothingness of those raw, untamed miles. Then there was this rusty old pickup truck with a dead girl in the back and a steely-eyed, emotionless, potential-killer for a driver. In the middle was Marc, shrugging his shoulders and wondering what Lacy’s problem was.

She walked over to the truck. “Can we rent a car in Tettichuk, Russell?”

“There’s not much in Tettichuk,” he said. “I thought you guys were hiking back.”

“I’m not going back into the woods,” Lacy said.

Russell looked at her and then toward Marc, who was standing by the treeline just out of earshot. “I’m glad to hear you say that. This country’s no place for people like you.”

“You mean women?”

“No, I mean city folk – tourists.”

“What about the car, Russell?”

“I’m sure the constable could give you a ride up to Fort St. William. There’s a couple motels up there, and you can rent a car up there, eh. I’d take you myself, but –” he paused, tilting his head behind him toward the bed of the truck.

Lacy nodded, and Russell began to clear enough space in the cab for two passengers.

Two hours later, after a long, nausea-inducing ride down the bumpiest road in Canada, they arrived back in civilization—a village of about four hundred people with a single RCMP constable who'd known Russell Eldridge since grade school.

And it seemed that this constable was looking to Russell for guidance on how he should act. When the constable first approached the truck, he put his hand on Russell's back and let out an almost inaudible, "I'm sorry, buddy." And when he saw the shape of the young woman, wrapped in the tent like that, he just said, "Aw, Erica, God that's just—" But Russell gave him a look, and Constable Gerrard lowered his eyes and began to set about the silent business of moving Russell's girlfriend. Lacy and Marcus stood beside the truck while Russell and the constable took the body into the station.

"You know, it's totally different watching somebody else carry her," Marcus said.

"I need a glass of water," Lacy said, and she followed the constable and Russell into the building.

Marc sat outside by the truck while Lacy waited in the station. The constable and Russell were speaking in an office behind a closed door, presumably going over Russell's story. Lacy began to doze as it got darker outside. She guessed that she must have fallen asleep, because when the office door opened, Marc was beside her on the couch. Russell came out, followed by the constable. When they stood up, Russell extended his hand to Marc, shaking hands firmly enough to bring out those clearly defined lines on Russell's forearm. Then he reached for Lacy with

both arms, as though to hug her. She jumped back, and this seemed to shock Russell, that she would back away in such a pronounced fashion.

He stood there puzzled by this for a few seconds, then he said, "Okay. Okay. But, you know, I just have to tell you both how much your help means to me and to Erica's family. I don't know if I could've brought her home to her family without your help."

Then for a fraction of a second, Lacy thought she could see the smallest crack of emotion – maybe – just the slightest hint of sadness in Russell Eldridge's cold eyes. Then it was gone again.

"I'll never be able to repay you," he said, "but I'll be grateful to you both till the day I die."

"I need some air," Lacy said. "I'm not feeling well." And she walked from the building into the hollow glow of the police station's fluorescent battle against the dark Canadian night.

Constable Gerrard asked Lacy and Marc to call him George when they climbed into his SUV. He put Lacy in the back and made some joke about never putting a girl as nice as her into his back seat before. It felt odd to Lacy, that after all this, she should be back there, sitting inside the constable's cage. She could hardly hear Marc's voice once the vehicle started moving, but he and the constable were talking away as the SUV left Tettichuk for Fort St. William. The constable had already called the motel in advance, and he couldn't stop saying what a wonderful thing it was that

Lacy and Marc done. She thought she could hear Marc saying they didn't really have a choice.

Lacy couldn't hear Marc once they hit the highway, but for several minutes she heard George the Constable say things like, "Yeah. Yeah? Oh right. Oh that's something. You folks did a fine thing. Yeah. It's a good thing he found you then, but that's Russell. Yup, that's the kind of man he is."

"George, could you tell me—" Lacy interrupted, leaning forward. "That man—are you even going to ask him any questions about what happened out there?"

The constable paused for a moment and looked up at her in the mirror.

"Well, I don't need to ask him anything, ma'am. Russell told me how the whole thing happened."

"And you believed his story?"

"Of course I believed Russell. Is there some reason I shouldn't?"

"It's a funny thing, but I have a hard time thinking he cared too much about that woman. He spends two days carrying the body of a woman he supposedly loves, never a single tear or a single word about it. You don't find that the least bit strange?"

Lacy could see the back of the constable's head, nodding, and he tried to turn around to reassure her as he spoke, "That's just Russell, you know. He's always been like that. Very even keeled. And you know, he was in the Special Forces. He's told me some real tough stories, and you'd think he was talking about the weather. It's what made him such a good soldier, eh—his ability to

compartmentalize things. He'd stay focused without letting his emotions get in the way there."

"But it's one thing when it's another soldier. It's another thing when it's his girlfriend. I just can't believe—I can't."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that at the very least you do your job, you put aside your friendship, and you ask the man some difficult questions about what happened."

There was silence from the constable for a moment, and then Lacy heard Marc's voice. "You know, he gave Lacy a pretty good scare out there, George, showing up in the middle of the night like that. I think she was kinda rattled a little by the whole thing."

"Well, that's understandable," George said to Marc, before turning his eyes to the rearview mirror again. "You know, I could investigate a little more than I'm required to, ma'am, but what you have to understand is that I know these people, and I can tell you that Russell loved Erica as much as any man loves his spouse."

"I remember this time probably six months after they started seeing each other, Russell was on leave, and a few of the boys, we went down to Edmonton to see him. Erica came up from Calgary. We were out at this bar, and Erica, she goes over to the jukebox and starts putting quarters in, and Russell had gone to the men's room. And we didn't see, but there was some idiot hoser giving Erica a tough time, you know. And Russell come back to the bar, sees this guy bothering Erica across the way there. He turned his back to the bar and taps me on the shoulder. I turn around and I see this guy pinch Erica, you know, on her backside

there. She turns around and slaps this hoser's hand away, and this guy looks around to see if anybody notice, sees Russell staring at him, and he froze right there for a few seconds. Russell didn't say a word, didn't move an inch, just looked at the guy. And that fella there, he walked right out the bar like it mighta been a grizzly bear staring at him.

"That's the Russell Eldridge I know and I've known him my whole life. Erica never had to worry about a thing with Russell around. He don't talk a lot, but I know he took a lot of pride in that. That's why he was in the service, you know – taking care of people that couldn't look out for themselves, eh. It took an awful lot of his pride to have to ask you folks for help out there. And I can tell you right now, that he's going to carry it with him to the day he dies that he let Erica get far enough out of his reach he couldn't grab her when she fell. He's going to carry that.

"And that's something I don't have to ask. I know better, because Russell Eldridge is my friend."

After a few minutes of silence, Lacy heard Marc's voice, muted and impossible to discern, and shortly after Marc stopped talking, George's voice again, "No, I understand. I do. I can see that."

Lacy thought about what George had said. She thought about the Russell he described. She began to wonder what it would have been like for Erica – that morning she died – to awaken surrounded by the expansive beauty of the wilderness, and to walk the earth freely, taking in nature's most awe-inspiring landscapes without the slightest hint of fear in her heart. Even though Erica was dead now, a part of Lacy envied her that feeling.

Constable Gerrard dropped them at the motel in Fort St. William. It was dark already, and he told them that if they didn't hurry, the two restaurants near the motel might close before they got a chance to eat. They were both starving.

They collected the key from the front desk, stashed what remained of their belongings in the room, and headed to the restaurant closest the motel.

Lacy tried to eat, but about halfway through her meal, she found her stomach becoming more unsettled, and the nausea returned with even greater force. She began to wonder now if it had been the water at all. Marc and Russell had both been fine. Marc ate his dinner and the half of Lacy's that went uneaten. Then they walked back to the hotel.

On the nightstand was a brochure with a picture of Fort St. William in the autumn, with floral colors in the foliage and the majesty of the encircling peaks crowned in a thin layer of snow, giving this rural village's skyline a hint of a glow that probably rarely visited the fifty-eighth parallel. All Lacy had seen in British Columbia, here and elsewhere, were dull grays, deep conifer greens, and heavy darkness.

She crawled into bed and shut off the light. Marc slid in behind her, putting his arm over her shoulder.

"I've been thinking a lot these past few days," he said.

"You have?" she said. "You haven't said much."

"Neither have you, Lacy. We were kinda dealing with something more important."

"I just want to go to sleep, Marc."

"I need to tell you this, Lacy. I do," he said softly into her ear. "This whole thing with Russell and Erica has put a lot of things in perspective for me."

She could picture him there behind her with his eyes closed, speaking but looking like he was half asleep already, mumbling into her hair.

Then out of nowhere he grabbed onto her so tight and pressed his forehead up against the back of Lacy's head.

"I was so scared," he said, and she could feel his body lurching up and down as he began to weep. "I thought I lost you up there. And the thought, every minute I was carrying Erica—the thought that it could have been you. I can't lose you, Lacy. I couldn't bear the thought of going through this world without you, oh, God."

Lacy felt him holding onto her like a scared child clutching a stuffed animal for comfort. He wept for minutes like this. Lacy didn't know what to do or to say, except to put her hand on his and wait for him to stop crying, and all the while, she could feel her dinner churning in her stomach, until finally, she had to get up.

She threw off the covers and ran into the bathroom, only just raising the toilet seat in time to kneel and lose her dinner in the water below. And she knelt there for what seemed like an hour, retching and crying, alone on the floor of that motel bathroom, with the sting of acid in her throat and in her nose. The longer she knelt there alone, the harder she wept, and the more she felt the aching soreness in her knees, still present from two days before when she'd

crawled a hundred yards for her life across the shale of Little Bear Ridge.

In reality, Lacy was there for less than ten minutes, but it was long enough, she thought. Ten seconds would have been long enough for a hand on her back to lend some comfort. She struggled to her feet, cupping water from the tap to her mouth to wash out the bitter taste of the sickness.

Marc looked asleep in the bed when she shut off the bathroom light, but he wasn't.

"Could you crack the window a little, honey?" he said when Lacy got to the foot of the bed.

"What, Marc?"

"Open the window, Lacy. The puke—it smells awful."

"It's freezing outside, Marcus," she said. "I'm sick and I'm cold."

"Just for a minute, and then we can close it," Marc said. "Just to let the air in."

Lacy turned on the light and began to get dressed. She grabbed her thermal from the backpack, put on her pants and socks, and took her hat and gloves from her coat pocket.

"What's the matter?" Marc said. "What are you doing?"

"You don't have to tell me twice," she said.

Lacy put on her coat, but she could tell Marc didn't realize she was leaving until she stepped into her boots, not even bothering to tie the laces. She slid open the window and walked out the door, clutching her cell phone in the hopes that she might get a signal to call someone—her sister, her mother, the rental car company—but there was

no signal in this town. In the North, all cries for help eventually fall silent.

She walked to the middle of the parking lot, her breath floating away in a fading cloud, her fragile body bathed in the artificial light of this sub-arctic village, this snow-globe bubble surrounded by a shroud of darkness, and in the distance, thousands of feet above, the peaks encircling Fort St. William were getting the fall's first significant snow. Lacy thought she could almost feel the whitening peaks up there, towering over her, just like the Rockies behind the home she and Marcus had shared in Colorado—the life they'd shared.

And for the first time since it had happened, Lacy thought of letting go in that memory — of the peace it would have brought her to release that hand and to drop away, slipping into the empty wilderness beneath the western slope of Little Bear Ridge on the southernmost face of The Camber.