

August Fifth

by Laura Frost

A scattering of dust and rocks tumbled off the cliff. Tiff staggered backwards, her feet scrambling for solid ground. As she grappled for a boulder, her eyes followed the rocks' slow-motion descent until they disappeared into the valley below. Gulping a breath of mountain air, Tiff pressed her back against the cliff face, a half-empty urn clutched to her chest.

“Well, buddy,” Tiff said, “how about we finish up here and then we find our way out of this mess?” She glanced sideways at Gus, then back to the sheer drop a few feet in front of her. It plunged hundreds of feet and ended in an indistinct mess of rock and tree. Gus lolled his tongue, its pinkness glowing amid the dreariness surrounding them.

Bracing her legs, Tiff held the urn out and tilted it into the wind. Ashes floated from the container and danced on the breeze until they vanished into the mountain landscape. Gus whined softly.

A single tear carved a line through the dusty film on Tiff's cheek. As she stared into the gray sky, a wet nose nudged her leg and her boots' grip shifted on the uneven shelf.

“Gus!” Tiff screeched as her feet slid on loose scree. The urn tumbled from her fingers and bounced off the rock ledge, somersaulted through the air, and vaulted off a rock twenty feet below. Tiff landed on her bottom and slid towards the edge. Her fingernails scraped the ground as she grasped for anything solid, and she dug her heels into the rocks. She slid to a stop inches from the precipice.

“Dammit, Gus,” Tiff said, her heart a drum as her hands and heels pressed into the rocks. “You can be such an idiot.”

Limbs shaking, Tiff pulled herself to standing and rubbed the fresh scratch marks on her wrists. Beads of red smeared across her skin before cropping up again. She peered over the edge and spotted the urn, too tiny for the contents they had held, perched on an outcropping that existed an impossible distance away.

“Come on, Gus. There’s nothing left to do here. Let’s go back up.” Tiff unfastened the leash from around her torso and clipped it into place on Gus’s collar. “Just until we’re away from this ledge.”

Tiff swung her daypack onto her shoulders; it was eerily light on her back. She looked out across the vista and searched for a trace of ash, but only heavy clouds hung in the air. Pursing her lips, she blinked back tears and turned away.

Tiff hugged the rock wall as Gus’s energy tried to get out ahead. “Don’t pull, Gus. Stay close.” The wall veered to the side and Tiff’s shoulders relaxed as she left the drop-off behind. Gus panted beside her, his dark paws picking their way over the rocks until they reached a dead end.

“Ready to go up, buddy?” Tiff freed Gus from the leash, swung it around her body, and clipped it into place with a practiced muscle memory. Like a mountain goat, Gus clambered up the rock wall. He spun around, rested his head on his paws, and looked down at Tiff.

“Yeah, yeah... You make it look so easy.” Testing one rock, then another, Tiff secured her grip around a slab and pushed off the ground. As her fingers searched for another hold, a slippery string of canine saliva dribbled onto the back of her hand.

“You’re a disgusting creature, you know,” Tiff said as she pulled herself over the outcropping. She dusted off her hiking pants and looked out across the treeless expanse of rocks that could have passed for another planet. “Where to now?”

Gus stared up at her as though looking for instructions. Tiff turned in a circle, her ponytail whipping her face as she took in the vast landscape surrounding them. Ribbons of mountains stretched as far as she could see, dotted with blue-green lakes that looked like puddles. The Burnt River wound its way through the mountains, a snake with no beginning and no

end. And her town, like a toy village, was nestled in the middle of it all, just below yet hours away.

Turning her back on the world, Tiff looked for a familiar landmark among the monotonous field of rocks, but she could not tell where the terrain ended and the sky began. Wind-beaten wildflowers hugged the ground, a lonely pika cried from a small rise, and then only gray.

“We need to get out of here, Gus. We’re going to lose daylight soon.”

As Tiff trudged across boulders and hopped over a lingering pile of dirty snow, her internal compass spun in circles. Beyond the next knoll, a single pine—not much taller than Gus and with knobby branches on its leeward side—stood like a sentry atop the bleak landscape. Tiff stopped.

“Huh.” She scanned the horizon for flagging tape or inukshuks, but the landscape was devoid of anything human-made.

Tiff retraced her steps and turned left at the snow. “Maybe this is the way back,” she called. She pushed herself up the slope, the clatter of broken porcelain echoing around her as her boots crunched loose shale with every step. She pulled herself over the final lip and stopped short. “Son of a...”

Bending to a crouch, Tiff raked her hand through the scree and gazed into a deep gorge. Stunted trees clung to the sides of the chasm as a rosy finch darted around a rock outcropping. Tiff’s fist tightened around a handful of rocks; her eyes narrowed as sharp edges bit her skin. She hurled the rocks through the air. Gravity cut their forward momentum and they were swallowed by fissures and shadows.

“Okay,” she said as she stared into the belly of the mountain. “We need a plan.” Tiff chewed her lip, the taste of salt, honey lip balm, and dust playing on her tongue.

Shrugging off her pack, she stumble-jogged down the knoll and collapsed to the ground. As she unzipped the pack, Gus nudged her hands aside with his nose and stuck his head into the bag.

“Get out of here, Gus,” Tiff said, pushing him away. “Give me a sec and I’ll find you some water.” She pulled out his collapsible dog bowl and Gus licked up residual drops like they were bacon grease.

“Here, dummy.” Tiff twisted off the top of her water bottle. Holding Gus back with one hand, she tipped water into the dish. “Don’t spill any. We don’t have much left.” As a gentle *lap-lap-lap* floated from Gus’s busy tongue, Tiff peered into the bottle and sucked in her breath—only a third of the water remained, and her other bottle was already drained. She took a quick swig and forced the bottle from her lips before she could empty the container with a wanting gulp.

Tiff stuffed the bottle into her pack and pulled out her notes. The papers fluttered, struggling against her grip.

There are so many trails on Spirit Mountain that branch out, you need to be constantly checking your route.

We are avid, well-seasoned hikers, and this is the first time we have ever been beaten by a mountain.

You don’t want to get stuck on Spirit Mountain past dark. Even in the summer, hypothermia can set in pretty quick.

Tiff wrapped her arm around Gus and pressed her forehead to his; the smell of musky dog drifted into her nose. Eyes closed, she leaned into the strong beating of his heart. “What do you think, Gus? What are our options?”

Gus wriggled free and cocked his head.

“Yeah,” Tiff said, tightening her blowing ponytail with a quick tug. “That’s our problem, buddy. I expected to be off this mountain an hour ago. And don’t forget, the sun is starting to sink. Time is not on our side.”

The world seemed to expand around her. Jagged peaks, the same in every direction, disappeared into infinity and left Tiff a speck on a mountain. Gus disturbed the shale, its clatter lost to the wind and altitude. The lonely pine was gone, engulfed in a roll of cloud that was inching across the summit like slowly spreading poison.

“I’m going to get us off here.” Tiff cupped Gus’s head and looked into his dark eyes while she caressed his ears. “I’m not going to let us...” His face blurred through her tears as she fought to pull in a breath. Gus’s warm body, rhythmic breathing, and strength of his aura brought Tiff’s heart rate down.

Opening her eyes, she watched as a tiny semi rolled across a tiny highway.

“Actually...” Tiff said, her pulse quickening as her eyes danced. “I wonder...”

Gus’s slobbery tongue was all over Tiff’s face as she dug around in her pack, and her fingers sang when they brushed her phone. When she opened the screen, a laugh tumbled from her lips. “I actually have reception up here.”

The wildflowers trembled and the pika screamed as Tiff listened to the ring tone. “Pick up, pick up...”

“Hello?”

“Mike,” she said, a smile spreading across her face.

“Tiff? I can hardly hear you. Are you in the wind?”

“Yeah, hang on.” Tiff turned until the wind pressed into her side. “Is that better?”

“A bit. Where are you?”

“You wouldn’t believe...”

“Try me.”

“On top of Spirit.”

“On the top? What the heck are you doing up there at this time of day?”

As her fingers played with the loose skin of Gus’s scruff, Tiff gazed out at the valley. “Let’s just say I lost track of time and may have lost the route.”

“From up there, it’s at least five hours to get off the mountain and sunset is in three.”

“No kidding. And I have a feeling it’ll be longer than five hours considering I completely lost my way. I’m thinking that if I work my way around the gorge I can find a route down, but that’ll be at least seven hours before I’m off this damn thing. And I’m almost out of water.”

“So you’re calling for a rescue.”

“I’m calling for advice. You know these mountains better than anyone. What are my options?”

“Give me a sec...”

Mike’s heavy breathing and the banging of a screen door being wrestled into submission carried over the line. Tiff hugged Gus close, his body a weighted blanket for her fraying nerves.

“Okay,” Mike said. “I’m looking at Spirit through my bins. Where exactly are you?”

“I’m looking down on the town, so I guess I’d be on the southwest end. I have Gus with me.”

“Yeah... Yup. I think I see you.”

“You can *see* me?” Tiff said, pulling herself to standing.

“I think so.”

With the phone pressed to her face, Tiff turned into the wind and waved her hand over her head. “I’m waving. Do you see that?”

“That’s you, all right. What the heck are you doing on that end of the mountain? You’re way off course. You were right—you need to come down around the gully to the north, then hike back uphill to find the trail. You’re looking at seven hours minimum, but probably closer to eight. Why did it take you so long to call me?”

“I figured I could find my own way off this thing.” Tiff searched the town until she found Mike’s house. She could barely make out the teeny deck amongst his broccoli-like trees; there was no chance she could see Mike himself. “I’m almost out of water.”

“You already said that. I have no choice but to send out a rescue team.”

“Not a chance. I can get out of here on my own. Just tell me how.”

“Helicopter is how. At this time of day with no water, there is no other option.”

“But I have Gus with me,” Tiff said, finding the silky spot behind Gus’s floppy ear. “I won’t go without him, even if I have to spend the night.”

“I’ve got a dog harness that Atlas uses when we’re doing mountaineering work. It’ll fit Gus.”

“You think he’ll go into it?”

“He has no choice.”

“There really is no other option?”

“How’s death sound to you? And the guilt of making me write up a report on a dead hiker?”

The landscape blurred through a shot of tears. Tiff sunk to the ground and clutched her knotted stomach. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she barely felt Gus's nose nuzzle her neck. "What do I do?"

"There is a sheltered spot if you head over the rise to the east and then hike downhill for about half a mile. The helicopter can pick you up there. There are no good flat spots on Spirit, so it'll have to be a sling rescue."

"And you're doing the rescue?"

"Are you kidding me? It's my anniversary and Sarah would kill me if I missed dinner. But you'll be in good hands."

"Fine, but you have to promise me you won't tell Ben about this. I'll be mortified if he finds out I needed a lift off here."

"Tiff, do you honestly think news like this can stay hidden in a town of our size? Anyway, that's beside the point—it's Ben who will be performing the rescue."

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With fingers clamped around Gus's collar, Tiff looked up. The helicopter hovered overhead like a prehistoric dragonfly. Dust kicked up and swirled around her, the beating of the rotors thumping in her chest and drowning out the wind's howl.

"Hold on, Gus," Tiff yelled over the noise as Gus tried to wrench himself from her grasp. "It's going to be okay. Stay with me, buddy."

The door to the helicopter slid open and a smiling, goggled face peered down from the craft. The sight of another human on the godforsaken mountain wrapped around Tiff like a warm hug. A moment later, he was rappelling from the helicopter—a spider on its line of silk, the bright orange of his vest punctuating the gray surroundings.

"Hey, Tiff!" Ben yelled through his smile as his feet touched ground. "You certainly picked a fine day to need a rescue."

With a burst of energy, Gus jerked Tiff forward as he lunged at Ben. He spread his paws on Ben's chest and covered his face with slobbery kisses.

“Hey, Gusser,” Ben said as he rubbed the dog down. “You sure are happy to see me. What do you say we get you off this mountain?”

Pouncing backwards, Gus spun in a circle, his tail wagging. “Ow! Gus!” Tiff cried, her arm twisting as she kept a solid hold on the collar.

“And I think I need to get you out of here too, don’t I?” Ben’s eyes crinkled in a grin behind his goggles.

“Why did Mike send you of all people?”

“Come on, Tiff. Think of this as a big, romantic gesture.” Ben’s arms were suddenly around Tiff. His nose brushed hers, sending warm tingles into her chest. “It’s not every day I get to rescue my girl.” As dust and wind swirled around them, Ben pressed his mouth to hers. The heat of the kiss engulfed Tiff and melted the chill in her bones.

“You sure know how to make an entrance, but I don’t think you’re being very professional.”

“Here, put this on.” Ben tossed Tiff a helmet before turning his attention to the dog harness. As he fiddled with a carabiner, he glanced at Tiff and smiled. “And I don’t really care about professionalism.”

Gus pounced again and dug his nose into Ben’s hands. “Yeah, Gusser! You know this one is for you, don’t you?”

“Is he really going to be okay in that thing? I’m scared it’ll freak him out.”

“Atlas rides in it all the time and loves it. Now hold him still while I put it on him.”

“You know Gus doesn’t sit still for anybody.” Tiff hugged Gus but was knocked down like a bowling pin as Ben wrestled him into the harness. The dog danced and pounced again as if Ben was the key to happiness.

“See?” Ben said. “He loves it. Now for you.”

As Ben cinched the harness around her, Tiff stared off into the valley. The straps squeezed her legs like a straitjacket. “This is fun,” Ben said, brushing his lips to Tiff’s as he reached around her waist. “You should get trapped on mountains more often. Why the hell did you choose today to attempt Spirit, though? The weather is nasty.”

“Since when has weather dictated when we hike? Anyway, it had to be today.”

Ben stopped fiddling and flipped his goggles up. His soft eyes stared into Tiff's. "Okay."

With a final adjustment to the harnesses, Ben nestled Gus between him and Tiff. "The helicopter is going to lift right away. Gus will stay between us, and I've got you both. Enjoy the ride; not many people get to experience the mountains this way."

With a final rub to Gus's head, Tiff nodded and looked across the valley.

"Come to my place once we're on the ground," Ben said. "I'll make dinner and Gus can have a snooze in front of the fire. You can spend the night, too."

A smile crept into Tiff's face as Ben tested the carabiners.

Ben looked up at the helicopter hovering over them and gave the pilot the signal. As the straps bit into Tiff's groin, Ben yelled, "And maybe after dinner I'll propose to you."

"What?" Tiff shouted, her eyes growing wide as she was lifted into the air. "What did you say?"

As the distance between their feet and solid ground grew, Ben pulled Tiff close, squeezing the dog between their bodies. The helicopter swept away from the mountain; Tiff gasped as they were carried over the plunging valley. They swung on the line with nothing but wind to reach out to, air to lean up against, and empty space to hold.

Tiff looked at Ben—an anchor in a storm. As she craned her head to look up, a flash of vertigo grabbed her. The single rope that suspended them over the mountain range blurred and doubled. Squeezing and opening her eyes, she glanced down at Gus, his tongue hanging out in a doggy smile as he took in the vista.

"What did you say?" Tiff yelled, trying to find Ben's eyes behind his goggles. Ben smiled and pulled her closer.

"Ben!" A pocket opened in the clouds and a beam of late-day sunlight pulled Tiff's gaze from Ben's smiling face. The sun illuminated a patch on the side of the mountain, and a flash of light glinted off a silver container lost on a ledge.

Blinking back tears, Tiff found her voice again. “What did you say?” But her words were carried away, swirling with ashes that danced all around them.

LAURA FROST is a wildlife biologist and nature nerd with a passion for creativity. She has written three novels that she is working towards publication through traditional channels. Laura explores different corners of the world with her family whenever she can, from the chill of the Arctic Ocean to the peace of a Nicaraguan mountaintop, but most often simply navigates the ups and downs of life as she ventures across the continent.