

## *Chapter 1*



# Camping Alone

I CAN'T FULLY EXPLAIN MY need to be alone, only that those closest to me are driving me crazy: my father and his repeated insistence that I get a real job; mom, with her constant worries about my well-being as a single woman living in an “edgy” part of Torrance, California, near Los Angeles; and Brian with his hurt looks and constant pressure to book a wedding ceremony in churches of which we are not, and never will be, members.

My father is a self-made businessman with dreams of his only child rising to prominence as a stockbroker. I struggled through a business degree, but now I teach high school math. Needless to say, Dad is not pleased.

The most contentment in my twenty-five years comes from my relationship with Brian, the supposed love of my life. He proposed last year. I accepted the ring. The problem is I can't commit to the actual wedding. Just thinking about it gives me hives—literally. Brian is also disappointed.

I've camped a couple times, so I know the basics. Dad's taught me to put up a tent. He's shown me how to thread poles through the tent loops to make it stand upright, and how to filter water from potentially germ-infested streams. I borrow his tent, water pump, camping stove, and down sleeping bag. I roll them all up and attach them to my twice-used backpack.

By the time I board the junket plane for Helena, everyone—the screaming children, the polished businesspeople on their cell phones, the short-tempered security workers herding us through metal detectors—is an annoyance. I lease a car for the month from a nearly deserted dirt lot and drive away with gleeful superiority.

Northern Montana is rough and inaccessible, as far away from Los Angeles as I can afford. I tell Brian and my folks that they can find me in the Helena National Forest, home of several Native American tribes, including the Blackfoot Indian Tribe. This potential isolation puts my mother in a dither. I promise to keep my cell phone on at all times, but neglect to mention there is probably no reception.

In five minutes I am at the local market, which is staffed by Jerry, a helpful gentleman in overalls with salt-and-pepper gray hair. He looks as if he can fix anything. He proves it by unclogging the toilet in the back before advising me on camping locations and supplies.

“There’s an abandoned lodge with campsites bordering the edge of the forest there,” he informs me. “I’ve been clearing trails there for the Forest Service for twenty years.” He unrolls a topographic map on the counter. I point to the most remote section on it I can find.

“I want somewhere with no people,” I specify.

Jerry raises an eyebrow. I suppose with my thick eyeglasses and gangly frame I don’t look like the type of person who camps out in the woods alone. Jerry explains that there is an abandoned retreat house in the forest there. “It’s been closed for years now. Campsites are still available to the public. Private, if that’s what you want.”

I plop fifteen dollars down on the counter for the camping permit. Jerry hesitates. “Honey, you know it’s the height of summer.”

“But you just said—”

“I can’t promise you’ll be entirely alone out there.”

I push the money toward him, decided. I also purchase the map, cookware, numerous cans of baked beans, lunch meat, bread, sunscreen, a flashlight, and a lantern.

After we pack my gear into the trunk, Jerry circles my chosen spot on the map with a yellow highlighter, directing me to head north on the main road about five miles, then make a sharp left down an undeveloped dirt road for another two miles into the area. I wave goodbye as he calls out one final bit of advice: watch for bears. Black ones are swarming the place this summer.

A piney smell assaults my nostrils the moment I open the car door at the end of the dirt road. Alder and maple trees mix with various species of pines; the varying shades of green extend some fifty feet over my head. Despite the density of those trees, an intensely blue sky dominates the space up there.

I drag my backpack along the dusty trail about a mile, following Jerry's highlighted path on the map. A smaller path veers off to the right where I discover the log-slatted lodge. It sits next to the lake, grand in its position snuggled between two snow-topped mountains.

As promised, the place is deserted. A sign on the side door reads: NO SHOES BEYOND THIS POINT. I drop my pack, slip off my shoes, and turn the knob. The door slides open easily.

"Hello?" My voice echoes back at me from the empty building.

I wander inside a large meeting room where a giant elk head stares down at me from above an oversized fireplace. His eyes are soft and knowing. At least someone knows where I am, I think.

I poke through the empty side rooms and back out to my waiting backpack. After trudging another mile down the main path, I discover the bath house. I am relieved that when I turn the knob to one of the showers, hot water gushes out. There is also a comfortable-looking sauna that makes a steamy, fizzing noise when I hit the "on" button. I turn it off, planning to return later.

The campsites are yet another mile or so down the path. I choose one by a creek. It makes a lovely gurgling noise as it tinkles over rocks into the lake.

It takes me two full hours and five trips back down the path to transfer everything from the car over to the campsite. By the time I finish, I am dusty, hot, and thirsty. I slurp down water from a plastic bottle before tackling the tent. Inserting the metal poles into the flaps correctly turns out to be the trial of my day. They tend to buckle when I attempt to thread them into the tent flaps. Only after a full hour of painstaking threading with the side poles do I realize that I need to thread the larger poles through the top of the tent first in order for it to stand upright. I yank the side poles out again, cursing as they repeatedly buckle during the process. It takes me another hour to secure the spikes into the ground by stomping on them with my boots. By the time the tent is erect and ready for business, the sun sets.

After an equally frustrating struggle with my camping stove, it ignites, and I manage to heat a can of beans. I sop them up with pieces of the bread, hungrier than I've felt in years. It is dark when I finally zip up the door to the tent, turn off my lantern, and crawl into the waiting sleeping bag. I remove my glasses, placing them safely on the floor of the tent next to my head. Yet the more I pretend to relax, the more sleep becomes an impossibility. Strange noises engulf the tent. I hear the flap of a bird's wings above me, then a loud *Whoo hoo! Whoo hoo!*—maybe an owl.

Next comes a curious shuffling sound from the nearby foliage—soft and tentative, clearly some ground animal—a squirrel or a raccoon, I posit. I turn over in my sleeping bag, determined to remain nonplussed.

The wind increases until it whips relentlessly through the alder trees. Odd chattering sounds echo from the trees with increased volume until finally I hear the rustling of something large outside my tent; its hooves thud heavily through the pine needles.

I sit straight up and light the lantern. Okay, that was probably just a deer. The thudding hooves sound like they're right next to

the tent. Deer never attack humans, do they? Nah, I tell myself, that's impossible. I'm only imagining that this deer or whatever it is with the hooves is that close. Then I hear a loud brushing noise as it rubs its body against the other side of the tent. So it is that close. I feel woozy.

What am I doing here? I love Los Angeles. It's a city full of people, restaurants, shops, and opportunities. My friends and family live there. If something attacks me in my Torrance apartment, I have only to pick up the phone and dial 911. Out here there isn't even any cell service.

I listen as the hooves prance away into the night. I'm okay for now, I tell myself as I snuggle back into the bag. Besides, in the morning I can pack up and fly back to L.A. That's it, I think, I just need to relax, get through this one night. I'll book a flight home tomorrow.

But the longer I lie here, alert, tense, wide awake, the more relaxation becomes a joke. The hooves return, and the undefined animal clattering is joined by rustling in the bushes and the increasing sound of a stronger and stronger wind. My tent rattles. My thoughts spin over and over again, reeling repeatedly through my restless mind: Brian down on one knee, pressuring me to marry, my father reprimanding me for forgetting the correct way to thread tent poles, overly aggressive deer kicking down my tent, snapping at me with large, unnatural teeth. That's it—I'm about to be attacked by a battalion of mutant forest animals, all out for human blood. I don't actually fall asleep until near dawn, and that is only after I grope through my backpack for a sleeping pill, choking it down in an attempt to silence the escalating racket in my mind.

When I wake, it is the middle of the day. My body feels stiff and overwrought. I discover a mysterious sticky substance, probably pitch, on the corner of the right lens of my glasses. After an unsuccessful attempt to rub it away with bottled water and the bottom of my T-shirt, I give up and slide the glasses onto my nose. The sap-like globs on the right side of the lens cloud my vision.

The forest, so frenetic the night before, seems sedate now, soft, like the filtered sunlight through the canopy of pine trees. I find myself surrounded by bird sounds—twittering, chirping, and eventually a steady tapping against the tree near my tent. When I unzip the door and stick my head outside, I catch sight of a woodpecker. He pauses at the appearance of my head, and then dives for the crumbs from my dinner last night. I watch as he and his less colorful mate deliver the crumbs to a nest at the side of the tree.

I've never actually seen a woodpecker's nest before. Slowly I exit the tent in time to watch the tops of five small beaks open simultaneously into one giant, hungry gape. The parents drop my crumbs inside the waiting mouths.

I put a pot of water on the camp stove, pick a pine needle from my hair before pulling it into a ponytail, and unfurl the map onto a log next to the tent. Jerry did mention he worked on some of these trails for the Forest Service, and I am itching to explore them. Any thoughts of leaving the forest for the safety of the city dissolve with the grains of instant coffee I stir into my cup of boiling water.

I hike Jerry's groomed trails, packing a lunch to eat by the lake. The same *whoo hoo* cry from the night before follows me. I look up to see not an owl, but a raven, large, black, and formidable over my head; she circles above, heralding me and every other creature in the woods with her intermittent *whoo hoo*. Each time, it sends a shiver of expectation through my being.

After lunch, I sit on the wood dock that stretches over the lake. I take the spiral notebook from my day pack, and begin.

• *June 21, 2008*

*Hello Diary.*

*I'm a mathematician, not a writer, so please excuse the lousy prose. I need to speak with someone. It's about my father. He's*

*been sick the past month with cancer of the esophagus. Whoever heard of that? I figure I'm responsible somehow. Maybe by letting him down, I've weakened his immune system.*

I toss the notebook down on the grass in disgust. How stupid is this, me keeping a diary? I don't want to write down feelings. I know: I'll just record the facts every day. Stick to what actually happens.

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, I fall into a routine. Each night, the forest becomes unbearably alive. The unidentified hooves and the wind kick in around midnight, growing in intensity, shaking the sides of my tent over and over again until around dawn, when I succumb to frustrated exhaustion and drug myself to sleep.

I wake around ten to the filtered sunlight and the sound of the woodpecker family rustling together their breakfast. I gulp large quantities of instant coffee before stumbling over to the bath house for a shower followed by a sauna.

Back at the tent, I pack myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch, grab the map, and explore nearby trails, always ending my hike on the lawn in front of the lake. I hold my journal and a pen, consider that I might record the events of the day, but push the pages aside and opt for a nap instead. Dinner is either baked beans or pasta with a slice of bread.

After eating, I trudge back over to the bath house to rinse the cookware. I am not such a green camper as to miss the importance of putting away food at night. All sorts of critters could come right into my campsite, right into the tent, even, if I were to entice them with food. I remember my father telling me that wild animals are frightened by humans. I realize they would quickly push that fear aside if they were hungry enough.

The evening always climaxes with vows on my part to pack and return to Los Angeles in the morning. Then, I knock myself into oblivion with a sleeping pill.

• June 26, 2008

*Why am I even out here? I want to leave this place, yet on some level, I have to admit it excites me.*

*Now that sounds really dumb. It makes no sense for me to stay here, putting my life on hold to sit up with insomnia night after night.*

*Maybe I'll just camp a little longer, just a couple more nights, and see what happens. What could be the harm in that?*

• June 27, 2008

*I know I'm breaking my own rule here, the no feelings in the journal thing, but oh well. I keep thinking about Brian.*

*I want to love him. It seems right that I should love him. I'm twenty-five; isn't that when people are supposed to fall in love and get married? But there's something counter to "should" out here in the woods, something about the empty sky that compels me to break rules. I like the feeling of freedom out here.*

*Maybe I want to be empty in the end, like that sky—empty and free. I'm trying to dig to this deeper level, and maybe the answer is there's nothing deeper to find, that it's all just surface anyway. Marriage is sort of a solution to that emptiness, isn't it? Institutionalized togetherness—marriage and then children. I mean, it's safe; you know what you're getting when you sign up for that. Crap, now I sound like my mother.*

*I doubt if marriage is much of a guarantee anyway. It's not like I've done a stellar job connecting with my own parents. I bet Dad wishes he had a son, someone with more backbone. I haven't invented anything. I haven't made a million dollars. I probably even stink at teaching math. I'm certainly not self-sufficient like he always wanted me to be. I'm still borrowing money to pay my*

*rent. My wardrobe is the result of an overzealous use of credit cards. I bet dad has to make an effort to feign happiness with me—his only child.*

I stop writing. There is something off about this place—this forest, this lodge, this lake. It's not normal. I'm completely alone here, logically I know that, but I feel like something or someone is watching me right now.

That notion feels incredibly creepy. My pulse goes up at the thought of it—this undisclosed being, spying from who knows where, behind the pine trees maybe, or inside the lodge.

There is a charge to the idea, an edgy feeling. Awareness of this *other* comes from somewhere beyond my five usual senses; it jostles a powerful, heretofore unrealized, connector in my mind.

And it hits all at once.

• *June 28, 2008*

*Someone was definitely watching me as I shuffled through the woods today. I am being stalked.*

• *June 29, 2008*

*I sense the stalker more and more. He watches me roll my sleeping bag each night in my tent. He sees me drive into Helena for the cans of baked beans that have become a staple. I find myself looking for him behind me as I hike.*

*I am free of him at the market or local gas station, but such respites from my spy are rare, mainly because I go into town less and less now. It's too easy to stock up on necessities in one shot, gives me more time alone out here. I've grown attached to the unadulterated quiet here in the woods. I've never been so aware of my own thoughts before. But I'm not alone because of the mysterious Presence.*

*The Presence crouches around trees; it envelops me no matter where I walk. Of course, this sense of being constantly watched could be a figment of my imagination. Maybe I'm inventing this fictional someone out of boredom.*

*I should really get out of here. This place is doing a number on my head.*

• July 1, 2008

*The Presence is always there—always. Maybe he's a spirit, or a phantom who watches my movements from above, never actually making contact. My personal phantom.*

• July 2, 2008

*Look, I know I'm a selfish girl. I'm not sure why I'm here. I suspect somewhere in these woods, the Presence holds the answer. He knows me.*

*While I'm sitting here writing like this, or squirming in the tent at night, I'm exposed. Anything could rip through those fragile flaps that divide me from the forest. Maybe I deserve that. Maybe on some level I'm inviting it.*

*Hey, you out there, can you read these words? Come get me. I know you're there. Whenever I feel you watch me, I get this adrenaline rush. It's like rock climbing without a rope, being out here with you. Not that I've ever been rock climbing. Jesus, my life's been dull until now.*

*I like you. I like the sense of danger attached to you, and that's why I'm letting you see everything when you watch. Who are you?*

I put down the pages and watch the sun as it reflects off the surface of the lake. What's wrong with me? If there really is someone out there, stalking me, I should be terrified. He could be anybody: a purse snatcher, a rapist, an ax murderer. I stand, stretch up on tip-toe, and raise my arms to the empty sky.

I know he's not an ax murderer.

• *July 4, 2008*

*I heard him breathe today. His breath was steady, slow, and even. It followed me with unnerving regularity on my hike this morning. The sound of it got louder and louder with each step.*

*Now I can't hear anything. Where did it go? I'm feeling . . . oddly rejected by its disappearance. Maybe whatever it is went away forever.*

I walk the path to the rental car, turn on the motor, and drive as calmly as I can down the hill into Helena. I park in the lot by Jerry's camping store, pull my cell phone from my pocket, and dial Brian's number. The steady ringing of the phone is followed by his wooden voice on the answering machine.

I cough, clear my head before speaking. "Hey, honey, it's me. Hanging out here in the woods. Just wanted to hear your voice. I'm fine. I'll call tomorrow. You know I love you."

When I look out the window, I see Jerry, watching me tentatively from the doorway of the store. I don't want to talk to Jerry right now.

He waves. I roll down the window.

"Everything okay?" Jerry calls.

"Oh, yeah. I was just making a phone call." I turn the key in the ignition, back out of the lot.

I'm losing my mind. Only a crazy person acts like this.

I FEEL MORE RESTLESS THAN usual as I prepare for nightfall. I pace the campsite, secure the metal spikes holding my tent into the ground. The wind picks up early, before I even finish my baked beans. I crawl into the tent as soon as it gets dark and take my sleeping pill early. It is the last one in the container.

I wake up in the middle of the night to the sound of breathing all around me, a distinct sucking in and out that reverberates through my tent. I realize with fascination that whatever it is, it is breathing just outside, right next to my head.

The breath is loud. The breath is sensuous. It is terrifying and unavoidable, the in-out, out-in rhythm of it. I know by its beat that it is attached to a living heart, full of unrequited yearning for connection, just as surely as my own heart yearns and aches there in the dark.

I shudder at the breathing, but in the same instant, smile. That thing that stalks me with undeniable certainty has found me at last. The sound, my sound, is real and loud and imminent. Despite my fear, I am relieved.

I consider exiting the tent to confront whoever or whatever is out there. Instead I curl deeper into the sleeping bag and listen to his breathing.

• *July 7, 2008*

*It's been several days since I heard him at my tent, and nothing's happened: no breathing, no sense of someone watching me from the bushes, nothing. I've been hiking the forest along the usual paths every morning, ready for I know not what.*

*Last night, I searched for the source of the breath with a flashlight under every twig and rock. It's so frustrating. I know something was there, but now there's nothing, nothing, nothing. I feel completely alone.*

• July 8, 2008

*Today I came eye to eye with a Doe and her twin fawns. So stunning was she, so charming her offspring, that for a moment I forgot the mysterious breath.*

*I wondered if the source of the breathing was the Doe, but realized this is impossible. The Breather was undeniably male; I sense this fact. I bet he even lurked about the forest somewhere quite close then, watching me watch the Doe. As I gazed at the mother and her twins in awe, I sensed his presence.*

• July 8, 2008 (Evening)

*I'm finding it difficult to put down the journal tonight. So I'm breaking my established routine to get back to it.*

*The light of the lantern tonight makes it easy to write sitting outside the tent on a log. That way I can look up every once in a while at the stars. Were my father here, he would be able to name all the constellations in that northern summer sky. As it is, I can pick out some of them myself: Cassiopeia, Orion's belt, and far off in the distance, traces of the curve of lights that compose the Milky Way. The sleeping bag wrapped tightly around my body feels warm and cozy.*

• July 8, 2008 (Later)

*My heart fills with an indescribable yearning, a conscious need to find the Source, the he who watches me always. I have experienced this type of longing before on many occasions; I have often squelched it with alcohol, sex, even food back in Los Angeles. Here, there is nothing with which to squelch the need, so*

*I am left with it, raw, circumspect; what I feel now can only be described as an ache.*

*I should learn to meditate. I like the idea of it—clearing my cluttered mind of all that debris floating in there. How could I have been so unaware of all that clutter before now?*

*When I get back to Los Angeles, I'll sign up for a meditation class—maybe at the yoga studio where I take classes. I've been doing that for exercise for the past year, but maybe what I really need is something to relax my head.*

I close my eyes softly, the warmth from my body encased in the sleeping bag a soothing contrast to the crisp outside air. I should sleep out here.

Without warning, a deep, guttural sound comes from the thicket of trees next to me, less than three feet from where I'm sitting. I jump. The sleeping bag and the journal slip together to the ground. My gut moves into my throat.

I keep my head down. As I turn toward the direction of the sound, I see the large shadow of a hulking, four-legged figure. It growls again. The sound is beyond menacing.

I forget everything I've ever learned about contact with bears in the wild. I run. I race, stumble, trip, crawl at a high speed, manage to get on my feet, so I can move my body as fast as I can to the bath house. Once inside, I shut the door and lock it. For the rest of the night, I sit on the floor by the shower. Nothing else happens. I sit there, eyes wide open, and shiver.