

# Bluffing

By Gail Helgason



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She reaches for her double-faced pile jacket in the hallway, opens the front door, and runs down the sidewalk as fast as she dares. It's only three blocks to the Jasper hospital. Wind-driven rivers of ice have formed on the hospital steps and Gabriella almost loses her footing. She grips the railing. She wonders what her grade ten students would think if they could see her, clutching the rail, as if the slightest breeze could blow her down.

Inside the hospital, equilibrium returns. The tiled floor feels cold, even through her vibram soles. The hospital is modern and all on one level. The corridors are eggshell white, full of promise, Gabriella thinks. She would have preferred vomit green. Even the reassuring medicinal smell seems diluted. The scent reminds her of the homemade cleaning solution she prepared at Liam's insistence. She used the mixture for a week, until she noticed that it took twice as long to remove grime as the concentrate she bought at the janitorial supply store. Liam hadn't noticed that she'd stopped using it.

The nurse at the station nods to Gabriella. "It will just be a few minutes," she says. "Won't you have a seat?" She can't be more than twenty-two, thinks Gabriella, three years younger than she is. She sinks into the vinyl couch. Only three weeks since the accident, and it seems as if she's been waiting forever.

On that morning three weeks ago, a light frost had silvered the clubmoss along the trail. Ahead, the plum-coloured peaks of the Maligne Range cut razor-sharp silhouettes against the sky. Gabriella noticed how Liam's thick black hair was cut as fashionably as ever, unusual for a climber, although his face appeared lined and travel-worn.

Gabriella hadn't proposed the hike until the night before. She'd called it "one last outing before the snow comes." She didn't want to

let on that it might mean anything much to her. At the lake, she planned to bring up the subject of the lease. The landlord said he'd have to know by October 31 if they would sign for a year. Housing was so tight in Jasper; he had at least three people who would take the house sight unseen. Would they sign the lease or not? He always speaks to her about these matters, not Liam.

The morning sky began to cream with cumulus clouds. Below, in the valley, the dark greens of white spruce and tarnished golds of the poplars wove an intricate montane tataran.

Liam stayed in the lead. At times, Gabriella had to run, the way her students sometimes did to keep up with her on field trips to nearby bogs and meadows. But she didn't mind Liam's pace. She sensed a special energy to the day. They'd be able to firm things up at the lake, the way they never could in town, knocking elbows, rushing about. She couldn't take the uncertainty much longer, now that Liam was talking about going off again for the winter, and she couldn't afford to keep the house herself. She thought that signing a one-year lease demanded a certain courage, a certain faith that the earth will keep holding them up, a certain commitment. She planned to introduce the subject in this way, as a challenge.

"Should get the lake all to ourselves," Liam said.

His boots left the partial prints of an expensive trademark on the soft loamy trail. His jacket was new, too. He spent most of his money on outdoor gear—the little he made guiding American and German tourists up easy climbs in the Rockies. Liam liked to joke that one day he would have his photo in glossy magazines for high-tech outdoor gear. Prestigious companies would seek his endorsement. He always laughed when he said this, but there was a steel edge to his voice. He really believed it. She thought he was getting a little long in the tooth for this kind of fantasy.

When they were half-way to the lake, they stopped for a short break on a fallen log. They heard a man's laughter from somewhere below. Liam turned to Gabriella, his eyes vigilant. She had seen that expression once before, when Clive, one of the other mountain guides in the town, asked Liam if the rumours were true. Had he almost lost his nerve on Mt. Robson last year, when he realized the American climber he was guiding couldn't set up a belay that gave Liam adequate protection? Liam told Clive to go to hell. But Liam was secretly jealous of Clive. Liam has never been asked to join a big expedition; Clive was invited to Mt. McKinley last year.

"I'll handle it," Liam whispered.

Two young men approached. They looked to be in their late teens

or early twenties. They took big elastic steps, as if springs were attached to the soles of their boots. Grey jays emitted straccato cries into the spruce air.

"Planning on going up to the lake?" Liam asked.

"You bet," one of them replied.

"Might not be such a good idea," Liam said, his voice thick with sympathy. "We're turning back ourselves. Came across an elk carcass by the lake. Some grizzly had himself a dandy breakfast."

"Grizzly, eh?" said the hiker. "Sure it was a grizzly?"

"Can't mistake those long front claws," Liam said. "They usually come back to the kill, you know."

"Guess you're right. Doesn't sound like a great place to be."

The pair turned around on the trail; the spring was missing from their step. When they were out of sight, Liam and Gabriella continued on to the lake. The grey jays had stopped shrieking.

Gabriella hears footsteps in the hospital corridor and looks up from a *Canadian Living* magazine to see the young nurse coming out of Liam's room.

"He's sleeping but I'll wake him in a minute," she says. Gabriella thinks she catches a quizzical look on her face. The nurse seems to be weighing whether to say anything more, then shows her straight teeth in a smile. "He really wants you to be here today, doesn't he?"

Gabriella nods. She doesn't know what to say. The nurse leaves her and pads down the corridor. Gabriella draws her legs under her. Her feet still feel icy.

Tell us what happened, the strangers said, pressing in on her with their uniforms, badges, khaki jackets, and pressed pants. All of them urged her to tell. "To aid in our understanding of how these attacks occur," said one warden, a safety specialist, with a smooth chin and a particularly insistent manner.

In the end, Gabriella felt she'd fooled them all. Oh, she'd answered all the questions, but that wasn't the same as telling the whole story. How could she, when it still wasn't clear?

Gabriella watches as a merlin alights on a bare branch outside the window. Odd that he'd get so close. Then she sees the streaky yellow plumage. Just a baby. He thinks the world is a nurturing place.

Where is that nurse?

Gabriella looks again at the merlin and remembers how she taught Liam to spot wildlife. He said he hadn't really taken much notice up till

then, his eyes were always on the peaks. But he wanted to know more. This was after they'd moved in together, before he'd gone off to Leavenworth with Clive for two weeks' climbing that turned into six weeks.

She and Liam had been looking for wildlife up on the Pyramid Bench. Liam couldn't see anything. Gabriella said the problem was that he was trying to focus on a single object. Instead, he should try to soften his eyes and take in the entire horizon. Liam tried this. He wasn't always willing to learn from people who might know more than he did, but she hoped he'd recognize her authority here. After all, she was the biology teacher.

They crouched behind a stand of young spruce. In a few minutes, they observed movement at the edge of the forest: a cow moose, holding her head high, ears up instead of out.

"Means she senses danger," Gabriella said. "She probably has a calf around here. Better freeze. The worst thing to do would be to run."

They both froze. Afterwards, Liam said he'd learned a lot being out with her. It opened his eyes, he said.

At noon, Gabriella and Liam reached the lake. She found a rock of flat limestone along the shore and they spread their foam pads to sit on. Liam dug into his pack and pulled out a small bottle of Remy Martin, French bread, a wedge of Camembert, and chocolate-covered almonds.

She felt a small rush of pleasure. He never lost the ability to surprise her, sometimes through astonishing small deceits, sometimes through extravagant gestures. In a way he reminded her of the plants and animals she so loved teaching her students about: organized, coded, identifiable as a type, but ultimately unknowable. Gabriella decided not to mention the foil-wrapped egg sandwiches in her day pack; she wouldn't dream of spoiling his surprise.

"To celebrate," Liam said. He didn't say right away what they would be celebrating, but Gabriella took this as an encouraging sign. She planned to mention the lease after lunch. She imagined winter nights with Liam hunkered over topographical maps at the yellow kitchen table. Only this time, she saw him studying places they could explore together, high meadows and alpine lakes. She smiled up at him.

"Clive and I worked it out last week," Liam said. He shook his crop of black hair and his voice pranced. "If we pool our resources, live in his old van, we've got just enough to get by for three months over the winter. So we're gonna head down south."

The words hit Gabriella like small, sharp rocks.

"I've had enough of this limestone," Liam continued. "Three months of good, technical rock—I'm talking Yosemite, maybe New

Mexico—is gonna make all the difference for me."

Gabriella grabbed for her pack and pushed herself off the rock. She strode as fast as she could without running. She didn't care where. Once she looked back, Liam was following her. Let him hoof it a little, she thought. She willed herself to walk fast and stay angry, because she didn't want to think about what might happen to her if she relented one more time. Maybe there would be nothing left of her except endurance, maybe all her other strengths would be sucked away. She'd seen it happen.

The sandy shore of the lake ended and Gabriella crashed through a thick stand of dwarf birch and rock willows. A twig snapped and cut into her cheek. She hauled herself through one last bush to the end of the lake, where the willows gave way to huckleberries.

The grizzly sow stood twenty paces ahead. The bear's hump and dishd-in face were unmistakable. There was not a climbing tree within reach.

In that instant, every cell in Gabriella's body yearned to turn and flee. But some inner force held her, a force she'd never before sensed. Gabriella dropped her eyes from the bear's stare and slumped her body forwards. She noticed how scuffed her boots were. She knew that if she retreated too quickly, the bear could be on her like a cat on a wounded bumblebee. She tried moving one foot back. The bear stepped forwards a foot or two. Gabriella froze. The bear stopped.

Behind her, she heard rustling in the shrubbery, and then Liam's voice. "Geez," he said.

It took all her willpower to stay where she was. "Try backing off slowly," she said. "Bluff him, remember?"

And now, as Gabriella sits on the hospital couch, the part that was missing comes back. How she waited to hear Liam take one or two cautious steps backwards. How instead, after one long minute, she heard the rustle of footsteps through shrubbery. Liam wasn't just stepping back. He was running away as fast as he could.

Gabriella hit the ground as the bear lunged forwards. She interlaced her fingers behind her neck, legs drawn up over her vitals. But even as her forehead pressed against the gravelly earth, she felt the powerful sweep of the bear hurtling past. It was giving full chase.

The nurse is back. She bends down to Gabriella.

"He'll be counting on your reaction," she says. "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

Gabriella nods, but as she is ushered into Liam's private room, she

is no longer so sure. He sits propped up in bed beside a table brimming with gladioli, carnations, cards from the climbing team. He looks a bit like pictures she has seen of mummified Egyptian princes. Bandages wind round his scalp, over his cheeks and forehead and chin. Only his blue eyes, nostrils, and mouth are visible.

What was it the doctor had told her after they airlifted him to the hospital? "No damage to the vital organs, that's the main thing." Then he'd listed the injuries. Gabriella had to bite down on her fist to keep from screaming.

"Gabriella," Liam whispers. She goes to his side. Broad beams of light penetrate the room from the west window and hurt her eyes.

"I'm here," she says. She places her palm lightly over one of his bandaged hands.

"I'm glad." Liam stares at her unflinchingly. "I thought you'd be here before this."

"I've been here every day for the last three weeks," Gabriella says.

"You've been sleeping most of the time. It's just hard for you to remember."

"You know I wasn't trying to run away up there," Liam says. "You know that?"

"Of course."

"I meant the bear to come after me instead of you," he says.

Gabriella's mouth feels dry. She looks at her outstretched fingers, the irregular roof her knuckles and joints form over Liam's bandaged hand. She wonders if she could move her hand if she tries. For a moment, she hears Clive's accusing voice and the bear's low grunt.

The doctor sweeps into the room and the nurse announces that they are ready to begin. The nurse starts to snip at the facial bandage. Liam's forehead emerges, what is left of his eyebrows, just shadowy lines really, then his cheeks and chin. Beneath the bandages, the skin is all puffed up, mottled, with ridges of shiny, rubbery scar tissue crisscrossing like tributaries on a map. Gabriella's eyes linger on her feet.

When the last bandage is removed, she pulls her chair closer to the bed and stretches her lips into a smile. She knows in her bones that she can manage this way, for the rest of the afternoon, at least. She still has that much bluffing left in her.

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Her short story collection, *Fracture Patterns*, was shortlisted in 1996 for both the Writers Guild of Alberta Best First Book Award, and the City of Edmonton Book Prize.