
LEAPFROG

A CORPORATE THRILLER BY

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FOREWORD BY:

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"Leave me alone!" she screamed.

Bethany Rawlins sped through the forest at a blistering pace. She'd been running at top speed for nearly twenty minutes and the long battle over the uneven forest floor was beginning to take its toll. Her breath was ragged and strained and blew from her mouth in quick blasts through cold mountain air. Swollen eyes welled with tears that streaked down the length of her pinkish cheeks and around to the sides of her neck. Her body was begging her to quit.

She glanced behind. He was still there. And gaining ground. A military shovel extended from his right hand, pumping up and down as he continued a relentless pursuit.

A rock. Branch. Another rock. Her feet slogged through an inch-deep puddle and then disappeared again into a sea of knee-high ferns.

She leapt over a rotted log, tearing the branches from a nearby tree. A new set of lacerations appeared on her flailing arms as broken shards of wood splintered to the ground in her wake. Beth grasped at the wound, thinking instantly of her letterman's jacket left beneath the cemetery's towering pine during her frenzied escape.

"Stop running, Claire!" the young man shouted from behind.

The rage in his voice accelerated her pace. But as her legs stretched beneath the darkening canopy of Oregon firs, the tears began to fade. Her strength was tapering. It was only a matter of time before her frame would reach its limit. She had to find help.

“I’m NOT Claire,” her voice cried blindly to the open forest. Things were happening fast and her vision blurred as obstacles quickly approached. A log. Rock. Branch. Another rock. “Please stop! I can’t-“

Beth stumbled forward, her foot momentarily teetering on a half-stump jutting upwards from a tuft of grass. She reached a steep hill and scrambled desperately upwards.

She knew from her childhood days that somewhere over this hill was Highway 4, the main artery into Longview. For the first time, she could see the sky. It was late. Five, six o’clock maybe. Plenty of commuters traveling home from work.

Beth clawed at the earth, fighting the menacing slope. She moaned and coughed as each of her hands and feet dug deep into the soft earth, each muscle burning from exhaustion.

“Stop right there, Claire,” a voice boomed from below. “Not another inch!”

He was close now and she could hear him fighting his own battle against the upward slope. Almost there. All she had to do was-

Beth’s right foot slipped across the damp surface of a loose stone. Her feet clambered for traction and though she tightened her grip, her hands were slipping across the thin stock of plant holding her in place.

“NO!”

The weight of her body tore the plant from its roots and she began to slide down the muddied incline. Beth grabbed wildly at anything that would slow her descent. Her fists dug savagely into the soil, scarring the side of the hill with violent, earth-plowing strokes.

Suddenly, her body jerked to a halt. With one hand clutching the decayed branch of a fallen tree, Beth’s legs swung instinctively beneath her and searched again for solid footing.

Clank.

The shovel's metal edge rang loudly as it connected with an exposed rock just beneath her foot. Beth stretched to put a second hand on the tree for more stability. He swung again, this time the blade slicing through the under-section of her sole, spinning her sideways.

Her kneecap slammed against the jagged edge of another stone, forcing an unprompted groan. The pain was sharp and she could feel the skin split open in the cool mountain air. A sudden sting gripped her stomach, her vision blurred, and the blood rushed briefly from her head.

Beth scrambled her legs, anticipating another attack but there was nothing. He'd lost his own balance and was gathering himself below. She shuffled hand over hand along the branch in search of less slippery ground. Her feet hunted for an anchor. Finally.

Beth screamed.

His fingers were locked around one of her ankles and pulling her downward. She was surprised at his strength. She could feel the bark tear at the skin beneath her palms as he clutched and pulled harder.

"You're dead, Claire!" he yelled. "You hear me? Dead!"

Beth kicked with all of her might, sending bits and pieces of earth tumbling into the man's face. But his grasp only tightened around her ankles.

She screamed louder and kicked with everything she had. Beth could feel his fingers slipping down the length of her foot. She kicked again, causing the stalker to pull the shoe from her foot and slide back down the hill. He let out a terrible growl as he threw the shoe aside and dug his own hands angrily into the damp soil to stop his descent.

Beth focused on the top of the hill, on Highway 4, and battled the incline on all fours until finally she reached a point where she could stand and locate the road.

Thank God. I-

Nothing.

Beth stared blankly over the entire valley. There were no signs of a highway cutting through the forest. No telephone poles. No buildings. No headlights. No sounds of a distant roadway.

For a brief and awkward moment she thought about Dana Vernoy, the band-camp daughter of two hippies who was covered in zits, ruined the math curve for everyone, and had two pet lizards named Elmo and Moo. Beth would need a hundred hands to count the number of times she'd thanked God, or whoever, that she was not Dana. On the contrary, Beth dedicated herself to the dance team, to everything social, and to the most controversial boys in school. This last experiment, however, was a mistake. Now all she could think about was how much she wished she were Dana Vernoy.

Splintering branches broke her empty stare. He was nearing the top. Beth bolted blindly along a high forested ridge connecting two steep hills, unaware of a thorn patch that scratched and tore through the skin on her legs. She was becoming more delirious with each passing second, struggling for each breath. As she tumbled over a fallen log, Beth felt a softball-sized rock tear past her head.

A surge of fear raced through her chest. She was starting to hyperventilate. He was going to kill her. Not kidnap. Not rape. He was going to kill her anyway he could.

As quickly as she could change direction, a second stone smashed heavily against the back of her shoulder forcing her sideways into the trunk of a large tree. Her arm fell instantly limp at her side. Beth could see him rummaging the ground for another rock as he galloped in full hunt. The pain was unbearable. She reached around her shoulder and felt a bloodied gap where the inner flesh had torn away. A flash of faintness. She had to keep

moving. Beth felt the pull of her stomach, the bile rising in her throat only to fall back again.

Her legs buckled slightly as she leapt over a patch of dead branches. A third rock went flying by. She could feel herself losing hope. Her once vibrant sprint had now been reduced to a desperate canter with an injured arm held tightly against a half-bent frame.

A fourth stone slammed into the back of Beth's thigh, sending her face first into a patch of ferns. She tried to get up but her muscles were exhausted. Beth gritted her teeth and pushed, the veins in her face bulging as she stressed her body to its limit. Push. Push. Almost. Push. Almost.

She coughed, half-choked, and fell back to the ground. Her body had given all it could afford. Beth closed her eyes. For the first time she was able to relax. She was finally able to rest her body. The pain seemed to instantly disappear.

She could hear the soft crunch of pine needles as the man approached. Beth drew in her arms and legs and opened her eyes to take one last picture of the forest floor and towering pines sweeping away from her. "God's country," her father used to say. She closed her eyes. Time to sleep. Wouldn't be long now.

She could hear the man quietly circling her body until at last he had come full circle. She raised her eyelids to half-mast. Beth wanted him to see her. He did. And then he leaned over and picked up a large circular stone, hoisting it high above his head.

"Go back to hell, you stupid!"

The man's knees buckled as Beth whipped a thick wooden branch into the side of his leg. She struggled to stand as he whirled about the ground in agony. He lunged forward to grab her but she rolled quickly away.

Beth stood and limped painfully in a new direction. Although she'd managed to open a slight gap, he was

almost on his feet, ready to pursue a second time. A rock. Stump. Another log. A minute later and the forest was too thick to determine how close he was to her. She'd done everything possible to escape. She desperately needed to rest.

Beth danced to avoid a grouping of trees. Suddenly her footing was lost and her body returned to the earth. She cringed in pain and clutched at her ankle, which had turned outwards to the ground. Beth quickly brought herself to her hands and knees. She looked behind but there was no one there. She waited and waited. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds.

Beth hung her head and tried to locate the pain in her ankle. The skin had ballooned up around the top part of her shoe. She shifted her weight from the swollen ankle and rose to her feet.

Beth was in shock and although she kept telling herself everything would be okay, she knew it would be dark soon and that he was still out there somewhere. Her hands trembled as she wiped the dirt and blood from her chest and face. Her shins, too, were bleeding and the criss-crossed wounds on her arms told the story of a frantic escape.

Why had she met him there? A graveyard no less. She was so stupid. Always competing for attention. And it sounded so good at the time. Melanie would never have believed she did it in a graveyard. And now look at her.

Beth froze. A noise in the distance. That sound. There was no mistaking it. An air horn from a logging truck. Highway 4. Beth was close. She was going to make it.

She moved cautiously to the edge of a steep hill, glancing down to a small ravine filled with trees. No more than fifty yards away, between the thick trunks of the Oregon woods, she could see the pale white lines defining the edge of Highway 4.

Snap.

Beth turned around and around in every direction to anticipate his approach but there was nobody there.

"Please, stop," she pleaded blindly into the woods. Her heart was racing again. Her chest tightened, her breath narrowing. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Snap.

The man approached rapidly twenty yards from her side. His soiled clothes hung loosely from his lanky frame as he gripped the shovel with two strong hands.

Beth hobbled further along the top of the ravine and, despite the agony, successfully navigated a maze of trees and rocks hooded with moss. The roadway was just below. The time was now. She turned sharply and bounded down the declining slope.

"Claire!" he yelled. "Stop, Claire!"

Beth hopped and skipped downwards, her arms flailing in every direction to slow her descent. She tried desperately to keep her injured foot from touching the ground but as her speed increased, she began to lose control.

In a matter of seconds, her body erupted through a thin fence of trees bordering the roadway's edge. Claw-like branches ripped into her arms, and then into her torso and face. Suddenly, Beth's injured foot snagged the underside of a length of barbed wire lying just above ground. Her arms shot instinctively out before her as her palms plowed through loose cinders lining the pavement's outside edge.

Smack.

The top of Beth's skull collided with the craggy edge of mile marker thirty-two, snapping her neck forcefully backwards. For the next few seconds she lay there motionless. As a small trickle of blood ran down the side of her forehead, Beth's eyes began to blink rapidly. Small twitching motions soon followed, causing her arms

and legs to move back and forth in quick, shivering movements. And then all feeling was lost. Beth was alive but unable to move. Far in the distance, at the roadway's nearest turn, she could see a small blur moving slowly towards her. Surely they'd stop to help.

The shadow of a person fell over her face as the man kneeled and smiled at his reflection in her open eyes. Beth screamed but no sound was made. She could sense one of his hands grip the back of her hair while the other clutched at her dress near the small of her back. Beth shrieked in dreadful silence but the ground beneath her surrendered frame began to move in the opposite direction, and within seconds the roadway disappeared behind a wall of thick mountain grass. Ten minutes later, the tranquil mountain air was filled with the dampened sounds of a metal blade furiously displacing shovel-full portions of the forest's soil.

With two walls of earth rising slightly from either side, Beth looked between the treetops at a passing cloud. She thought again of Dana Vernoy. And then, little by little, the world went dark.