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an extract from

The Boundless

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Published by

David Fickling Books

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From the trees comes a sound Will has never heard before, a series of gruff animal hoots that taper off into a kind of mournful sigh.

"Will, are you all right?"

Twenty yards to his left his father clings to a tree.

"I'm fine!"

"I'll come to you!" his father calls.

At the same moment they see it. A little higher up the slope, jutting from the snow, is the gold spike.

A rustling draws Will's attention. A snow-caked man clings to another nearby tree, a scarf tied around his face, revealing only his eyes.

"All right?" Will's dad calls up to him.

The man says nothing, just lifts a hand. His eyes, Will can tell, are on the gold spike.

"Help!"

This cry is muffled and comes from down the slope, where, not forty feet from Will's perch, the ground drops into the gorge and the rioting river. Will squints. On the very edge, clutching the branch of a spindly bent pine, his legs dangling over the edge, is Cornelius Van Horne.

"Hold tight, sir!" Will's father calls out. "I'm coming!" He

looks at the man with the scarf. "Help me!"

The other man makes no reply and stays put.

From the trees comes another series of gruff hoots.

"What is that?" Will asks, but instinctively he knows.

"The branch won't hold long!" Van Horne calls out with amazing calm.

"Pa?" Will says, a terrible fear spreading through him like cold.

"Stay there, Will. It'll be fine."

Will watches as his father carefully paddles down over the snow toward the rail baron, digging in with his hands and feet to slow himself. Off to the right a heaping drift mutters and creaks and spills itself into the gorge. Will feels the vibration through his body. Everything piled up along the edge could give at any moment.

"You'll be all right, sir," Will's father says as he reaches the spindly pine and wraps his legs around the trunk.

He reaches out toward Van Horne. "I'm going to take your wrist, sir, and you take mine."

The rail baron is a large man, and Will hears his father grunt as he takes his weight. Bracing himself against the trunk, James Everett pulls.

Will's heart is a small panicking animal against his ribs as he

watches his father struggle on the precipice. Van Horne's other hand stretches out and seizes a sturdy branch, and he pulls now too. After a minute, with both men straining, the rail baron reaches the trunk and holds tight. They lean their heads against the bark, catching their breath.

Will exhales and hears a rustling behind him. He turns to see the man easing himself down the slope toward the gold spike. He looks at Will and holds a swollen finger to his mouth.

"Shhhhh."

He plucks the golden spike from the snow.

"You and me," he whispers to Will, "got an understanding, ain't we? You call out, I'll find you and your pa and slit your throats. Got that?"

Terrified, Will just stares at the man's obscured face, at the narrow band of skin around his chilly blue eyes.

I know you, Will thinks, but he says nothing.

The man called Brogan turns and begins churning his way back up the slope. He brushes a broken branch, and the end twitches and then clutches his ankle.

With a grunt Brogan tries to kick himself free, but the branch flexes and grows longer. Like some mutant tree unfolding itself from the earth, a long arm stretches out and sprouts a bony

shoulder and narrow head, matted with snow. Brogan gives a cry of horror as he's dragged back.

A skunky stench wafts across to Will as the sasquatch thrashes itself up from the snow. Will knows now why the Natives call them stick men, for their limbs are so thin yet powerful that they look like they're made from the indestructible ingredients of mountain forest.

Will can see that it's a young one, quite a bit smaller than him. Though its mouth is wide, teeth bared, Will isn't sure if the beast is attacking or merely clambering atop Brogan like someone trying not to drown. Brogan beats at the sasquatch. From a pocket he pulls a long knife and stabs the creature in the shoulder. It crumples, sending up a terrible shriek.

For a moment Will thinks a treetop has snapped and fallen, for something thin and very tall hits the snow beside Brogan. But it's no tree. It is seven feet of fury, jumping down from above to protect its child. Will's insides feel liquid with fear. The creature's arms are vast knotted branches, its clawed feet gnarled roots. The adult sasquatch reaches down and grabs Brogan by an arm and a leg and in one movement hurls him. The golden spike flies clear of his clothing and lands in the snow, not far from Will. Brogan himself sails through the air, skids across the

snow with a squawk of terror, and disappears over the edge into the gorge.

Chest heaving, the sasquatch checks on its young, and then turns and looks straight at Will.

"Pa!" Will hollers.

"Stay still!" his father shouts. "Don't turn your back! I'm coming!"

Gripping the tree, Will stares at the sasquatch as it shakes the snow from its furred body.

"She just wants her child, Will," his father is calling. "Show her you're no threat. Don't look in her eyes."

Will feels a tremor and sees the snow sliding slowly past his tree like a river toward the precipice. Great rafts of it pour over into the abyss. An ominous creak emanates from his father's pine. It begins to tilt toward the gorge.

"It's giving way!" Will cries, seeing the snow's surface pucker all around.

"Swim!" Will's father cries out to Van Horne, and the two begin thrashing their way uphill toward Will. The snow slips and shoves against them. To Will it looks like they're scarcely moving, but they fight on against the tide.

When he turns back to the two sasquatch, they're skidding

straight toward him on the current of snow. Will clambers round to the far side of the trunk. Sliding with the snow comes the gold spike, and as it passes, Will seizes it.

"We're coming, Will!" his father shouts behind him.

But the sasquatch are coming faster. He can't help it—he looks into the creature's face and sees eyes as old as the mountains and as merciless.

"Move back, Will!" he hears his father cry, and then there's a sharp crack.

Will looks over his shoulder and sees Van Horne with a smoking pistol in his hand.

The mother sasquatch has collapsed in the snow, and her limp body is being carried by the current. The young one sets up a frenzied shrieking, its sharp mouth wide. It's coming right for Will.

A huge net unfurls from the air and drops over the small sasquatch. The creature knocks against the tree, struggling and yelping. Will leans far out of its reach.

"Don't shoot it!" calls a voice from the trees.

Mr. Dorian emerges on snowshoes, along with three other large men carrying thick measures of rope over their shoulders. The snow has finally stopped moving.

"We've got him, gentlemen. It's quite all right," calls Mr.

Dorian. "Take our ropes!"

Ropes are thrown out for all of them, and Will grabs hold. Mr. Van Horne and Will's father are pulled up alongside him.

"Will," his father says. "You're all right?"

Will nods, unable to speak.

"Well, Dorian," puffs Van Horne, "you didn't come just for my painting, did you?"

"I came for many reasons," says Mr. Dorian. "To see the greatest railway in the world finished—and to find a sasquatch for the greatest show on earth."