

THE EPIC TRUE STORY OF DANGER,  
DARING, AND HEROISM AT 13,000 FEET

# A BOLT FROM THE BLUE



JENNIFER  
WOODLIEF

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## **FIVE INJURED CLIMBERS. TEN SEASONED RANGERS. ONE IMPOSSIBLE RESCUE.**

On the afternoon of July 26, 2003, six vacationing mountain climbers ascended the peak of the Grand Teton in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Rain and colliding air currents blew in, and soon a massive electrical charge began to build. As the group began to retreat from its location, a colossal lightning bolt struck and pounded through the body of every climber. One of the six died instantly, one lay critically injured next to her body, and four dangled perilously into the chasm below.

In riveting, page-turning prose, veteran journalist Jennifer Woodlief tells the story of the climb, the arrival of the storm, and the unprecedented rescue by the Jenny Lake Rangers, one of the most experienced climbing search-and-rescue teams in the country. Against the dramatic landscape of the Teton Range, Woodlief brings to life the grueling task of the rangers, a band of colorful characters who tackle one of the riskiest, most physically demanding jobs in the world. By turns terrifying and exhilarating, *A Bolt from the Blue* is both a testament to human courage and an astonishing journey into one of history's most dangerous mountain rescues.

### **Praise for *A Wall of White* by Jennifer Woodlief**

**“A triumph of storytelling. Books of this nature are automatically compared to the works of Sebastian Junger and Jon Krakauer, but in this case the comparison is apt . . . compelling, dramatic, and haunting.”**

**—*Booklist* (starred review)**



**JENNIFER WOODLIEF** is a former reporter for *Sports Illustrated* and the author of *A Wall of White*. A graduate of Stanford University and UCLA School of Law, she has prosecuted first-degree murder cases as a district attorney and worked as a case officer with a top secret clearance for the CIA. She lives in Belvedere, California.



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# A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

ALSO BY JENNIFER WOODLIEF

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*A Wall of White*  
*Ski to Die*

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THE EPIC TRUE STORY OF DANGER,  
DARING, AND HEROISM AT 13,000 FEET

JENNIFER WOODLIEF

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To Nick,

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for both the climb and the view

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Acknowledgments

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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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## **Jenny Lake Climbing Rangers**

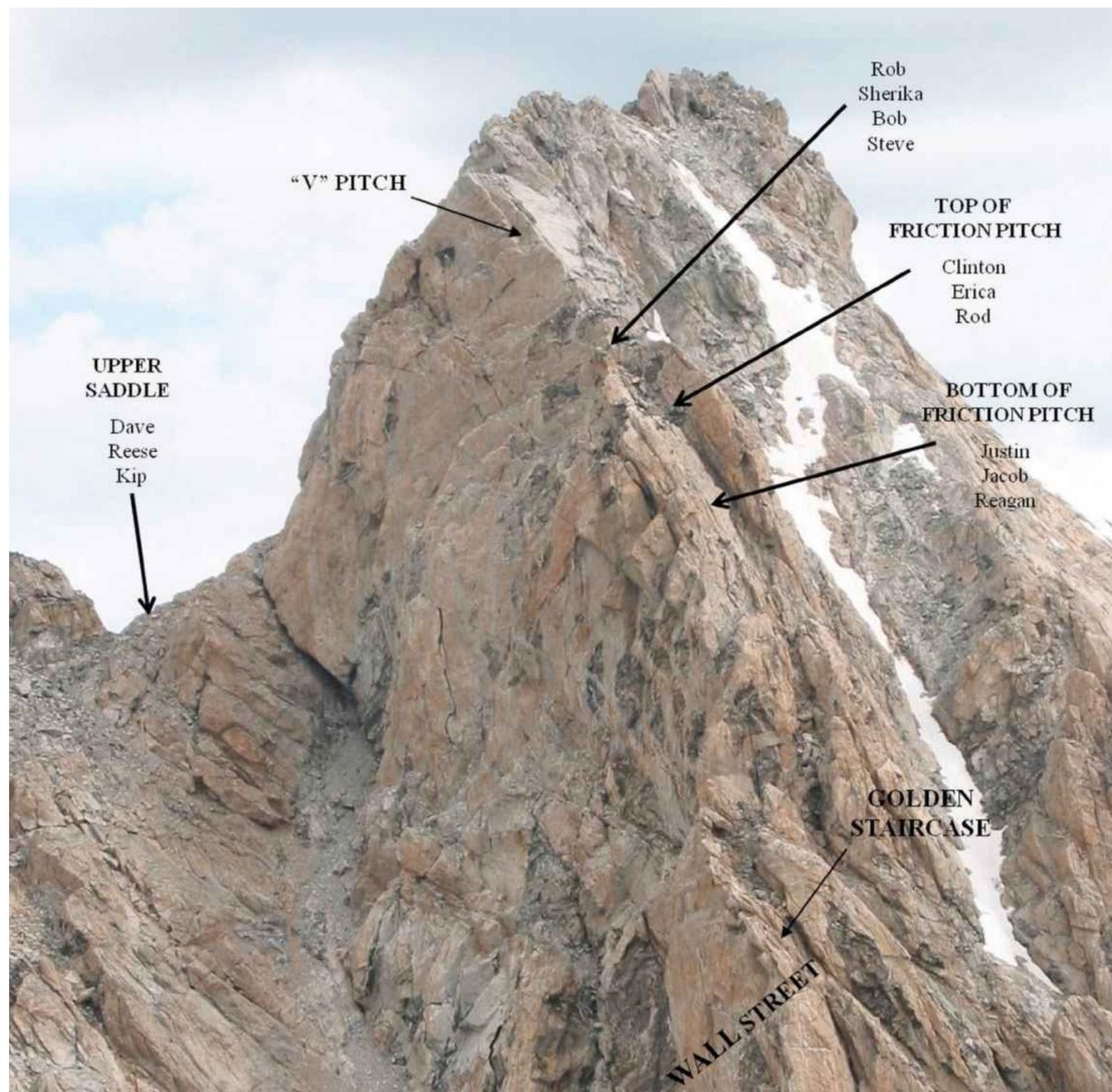
Renny Jackson—head ranger, spotter (in helicopter)  
Brandon Torres—incident commander (in rescue cache)  
Leo Larson—operations chief (upper scene)  
Dan Burgette—medic (lower scene)  
Jim Springer—leader (lower scene)  
Jack McConnell—at lower scene  
Chris Harder (of Gros Ventre subdistrict)—at lower scene  
Craig Holm—medic (upper scene)  
George Montopoli—at upper scene  
Marty Vidak—at upper scene

## **Helicopter Rescue Pilots**

Laurence Perry—2LM  
Rick Harmon—4HP

## **Idaho Climbing Party**

Rob Thomas—trip leader, son of Bob, brother of Justin, stepbrother of Reese  
Justin Thomas—son of Bob, brother of Rob, stepbrother of Reese  
Bob Thomas—father of Rob and Justin, stepfather of Reese  
Sherika Thomas—wife of Rob  
Steve Oler—father of Sherika  
Clint Summers—husband of Erica, Melaleuca employee  
Erica Summers—wife of Clint  
Rod Liberal—Melaleuca employee  
Jake Bancroft—Melaleuca employee  
Reagan Lembke—Melaleuca employee  
Dave Jordan—friend of Rob  
Reese Jackson—stepson of Bob, stepbrother of Rob and Justin  
Kip Merrill—friend of Reese



**"V" PITCH**

Rob  
Sherika  
Bob  
Steve

**TOP OF  
FRICTION PITCH**

Clinton  
Erica  
Rod

**BOTTOM OF  
FRICTION PITCH**

Justin  
Jacob  
Reagan

**UPPER  
SADDLE**

Dave  
Reese  
Kip

**GOLDEN  
STAIRCASE**

**WALL STREET**

“But mountains do not bow to hopes; mountains destroy those who have nothing left but hopes.”

—  
Pete Sinclair, former Jenny Lake ranger and author of *We Aspired: The Last Innocent Americans*

There appeared to be a slight break in the thunderstorm as the pilot approached the summit of the Grand, but high winds continued to swirl the clouds beneath the helicopter, and the sky was darkening off to the west. The aircraft was a Bell 406 Long Ranger L-IV high altitude, meaning that the innards of a Jet Ranger were boosted with a bit more horsepower and the tail rotor enlarged, approximately \$100,000 conversion. The modification gave the pilot more grip at altitude. Few helicopters are able to operate at 14,000 feet, much less with an increased pay-load capacity—this particular ship was a special piece of equipment, and quite the secret weapon in terms of mountain rescue.

Helicopter N772LM, nicknamed Two-Lima Mike for its call letters, was flown by Laurence Perry, a dashing 50-year-old Brit renowned as much for his flippant attitude on the approach to an accident site as his proficiency at shutting the joking down cold once he arrived on-scene. As one of the few pilots in the world capable of passing the flying exam required by the Jenny Lake rangers—a test that required, in part, a pilot to hold a nearly dead hover for two minutes straight while balancing a 20-pound log on the end of a 100-foot rope—Laurence’s eccentricities were roundly accepted.

In more than 18,000 flight hours, Laurence had never operated a helicopter exactly like this one before arriving in the Tetons, but he had become comfortable flying it on rescue operations with the Jenny Lake climbing rangers in the past couple of years. In reality, Laurence could be trusted, and was willing, to fly most any type of aircraft, although technically he was licensed only as a helicopter pilot.

On the afternoon of July 26, 2003, Laurence was transporting two park rangers, both of whom were wholly unmoved by the sweeping, iconic setting of Grand Teton National Park, on a reconnaissance flight. At that moment, the Grand Teton—the highest peak in the Teton range in Jackson, Wyoming, and a mountaineering classic within the climbing community—was nothing more than the extraordinarily unwieldy scene of a tragic accident.

As Laurence climbed closer to the top of the mountain, the rangers’ thoughts were already whirling around how to reach the victims, what to pack for the rescue, where best to be inserted into the scene. Much of this analysis was weather-dependent. If the pause in the storm held, Laurence would short-haul the rangers straight to the site, an extremely advanced rescue procedure in which rangers hang underneath a helicopter on the end of a rope the length of two basketball courts and disconnect from that line directly onto the mountainside. Short-hauling minimizes a helicopter’s hover time in the air but exposes the rescuer to incredible risk, especially in turbulent weather.

The rangers had received some information from the scene itself, transmitted to the ranger station by cell phone 45 minutes earlier from one of the victims on the mountain. They knew that several climbers had all been struck by a single bolt of lightning just shy of the 13,770-foot summit of the Grand Teton on the Exum Ridge on a 120-foot section of smooth, steep granite known as Friction Pitch.

The rangers were aware that someone in the 13-member climbing party was performing CPR on

one of the victims and that there was an array of other burn injuries, including paralysis. They also understood that ~~three of the climbers had hurtled out of sight below Friction Pitch, presumably in~~ treacherous area of the mountain called the Golden Staircase.

As the helicopter climbed, the rangers searched for figures on or below the brilliant glow of the Golden Staircase, but they couldn't make out any signs of life. About 100 feet below Friction Pitch, in the midst of a vertical sheer rock face by the Jern Crack, they did see three people clinging to the side of the mountain, their ropes apparently tangled in a few rock spurs positioned just above an abyss.

When they reached the top of Friction Pitch, the rangers were momentarily staggered by the sheer scope of the accident site. There were several seemingly dazed climbers wandering above the pitch, a young man with sandy hair and a vacant expression leaning against a large outcropping of rock, a motionless young woman slumped over the top of the ridge, and, most sickening of all, another figure whom the rangers would come to call the Folded Man, swinging upside-down from a rope about 50 feet down the mountainside. It was completely unclear to them how far he had fallen or how he had ended up in that location. His body was twisted into a sharp inverted V, the back of his head almost touching the heels of his feet, his belly button skyward. He was utterly still.

Leo Larson, something of a Fabio doppelgänger at six-foot-five and 195 pounds, his long blond hair pulled back in a loose ponytail, calmly snapped a few photos to share with the other rangers back at the rescue cache. Both Leo, age 47, and Dan Burgette, the second ranger in the chopper, had been with the Jenny Lake team before they had even begun using short-haul insertions in the mid-1980s. As the day progressed, Dan's duty as spotter in the ship would be taken over by Renny Jackson, head ranger, a 27-year Jenny Lake veteran, and all-around legendary climber.

The Folded Man remained limp and unmoving, and both Leo and Dan silently began calculating the safest way to recover the suspended body intact. Watching him rotate in the wind, contorted in the most unnatural of positions with no effort to struggle, the rescuers presumed that he was no longer alive. Still, Laurence kept the helicopter stable, lingering in the air about 60 feet away, as the pilot was checked to be sure.

Laurence and Leo were on the side of the aircraft closer to the mountain. Laurence, in particular, was transfixed by the man's torso split in that pose—as he later said, he didn't realize a body could do that—and he felt a wave of sadness wash over him as he flashed on images of forlorn bodies snarled in ropes and swaying in remote and precipitous regions of the Eiger.

It was while he was lamenting the desperate loneliness of epic mountain deaths that Laurence believed he glimpsed the man's hand twitch—or else merely witnessed his fingers flutter in a gust of wind. Laurence looked back at Leo and Dan and, in as unruffled a tone as perhaps only a pilot holding a hover at high altitude can marshal, said, "He's alive."

"Yeah," Leo said. "I saw it, too."

And as simply as that, the mission, at least as it applied to the victim who was hanging, in every true sense, on to his life by a thread, very distinctly took on the heightened urgency of a lifesaving rescue.

Traditionally, in a climbing-related rescue, rangers respond to a single person in trouble. In this situation, the multiple victims alone rendered the operation outrageously complicated, requiring a team of rescuers versed, and secure, in enduring a perpetually fluid and ever-worsening series of circumstances and weather conditions.

In the summer of 2003, the Jenny Lake climbing rangers were faced with several critically injured victims spread over a variety of different locations on the mountain, with turbulent weather diminishing daylight, and extreme vertical terrain just below the mountain summit. The risk was further ratcheted up with the necessity that the pilot execute precision, high-altitude helicopter maneuvers in the midst of a lightning storm while rangers dangled from the end of a 100-foot rope.

Beyond relying on trust, experience, and instinct to execute a flawless—literally flawless—rescue, the rangers would also need every twist of luck to go their way. The chances of the rescuers extricating all of the victims before darkness grounded the helicopter were devastatingly remote and dwindling by the second.

This is the story of the Jenny Lake rangers beating those odds.

\* \* \*

It is a rare thing for a ranger to save a life, even in the world of mountain rescue. Given the violent nature of mountaineering injuries and the remoteness of their locations, most serious accidents are fatal. The rangers in Grand Teton National Park confronted several deaths every summer season. This would, however, be the first time a climber had been killed in the park by a lightning strike.

Leo glanced up at the progress of the storm, the fading light. He and Dan made the briefest eye contact. It was unspoken, but they both knew it would take something damn close to a miracle for their team to pluck all of the victims off the mountain before nightfall. Success would necessitate the most complex and sensational operation ever performed in the park. It would require, in fact, what is widely considered the most spectacular rescue in the history of American mountaineering.

For a frozen moment, Leo looked steadily at Laurence, blue eyes meeting blue eyes, then nodded briskly, definitively, at the pilot. In response, he dipped his rotors and veered down to the Saddle.

“I get paid to do what other people do on their vacations. Except for the training.”

—  
Jim Springer, Jenny Lake ranger

When Renny received the call about the lightning strike on Friction Pitch on July 26, 2003, a Saturday afternoon, he was home with his daughter, Jane, then age 11. It was instantly clear to him from the information in the call-out—multiple patients, CPR in process on one, several missing climbers, bad weather, high elevation—that it was going to be a huge rescue. It was also apparent to Renny that while the mission would require many of the skills that he and his team regularly trained for every day, that particular tangle of events, at that specific time and place, would be anything but routine. In fact, it quite obviously had the makings of a once-in-a-career sort of rescue.

Renny Jackson’s five-foot, 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-inch frame is 150 pounds of pure, tightly coiled muscle, ideally designed to allow him to scramble up cliffsides Spider-Man-style. At first glance, the combination of his wire-rimmed glasses, his slow and soft voice, and his habit of using as few words as possible to make a point makes him appear bookish, lazy, almost timid. By the second glimpse, it becomes apparent that his brand of self-possessed confidence commands not just respect but also unwavering attention. He exercises in a traditional manner less than might be expected for someone with his exceptional core strength—in the winter, off-season for climbing, he lifts the occasional weight, goes for a run now and then, skis in the backcountry—but, as Renny says, the way you keep in shape for climbing is to climb.

And as a Jenny Lake ranger, climb he did—at work, on his days off from work, on vacation from work. Virtually all of his travels are climbing-related. His wife, Catherine, is a world-class climber herself. Family vacations and family traditions revolve around climbing always. His daughter can barely remember a time when she wasn’t climbing with her dad.

When Renny can’t get outside in the mountains, in bad weather, for example, the climbing gym in town, which seems as if it might be beneath him, actually provides some hand routes that are as challenging as climbing gets. Another climbing-centric workout he does indoors is chin-ups, despite the tendonitis in his elbows, to maintain his phenomenal arm strength. He knocks them out while drinking strong coffee and listening to rock-and-roll music. Ideally, he hooks up with another ranger and they blares some Bob Dylan or Rolling Stones, and works through what he calls Chinese chin-ups. The pattern is Renny doing 10 of them, then the other ranger doing 10, then Renny doing nine, and so on until they are each down to one, and then they take turns adding one each time until they get up to 10 again. The end result is that both rangers execute more than 100 chin-ups in rapid-fire speed.

By 2003, Renny had been hauling injured hikers and climbers out of the Tetons for more than a quarter of a century, about half as long as the Jenny Lake rangers had been around. Twenty years before they became the country’s most prestigious search-and-rescue climbing team, the Teton park ranger concept was conceived in 1926, when Fritiof Fryxell came to Jackson to research his doctorate in glacial geology. He returned the next year with his friend Phil Smith to claim first ascents on many of the range’s peaks, and the two of them became the first seasonal rangers when the area became national park in 1929.

The park originally opened with only four staff members, but tourism picked up after World War

II, resulting in a slew of visiting climbers and new routes. In 1948, backcountry rangers Dou McLaren, Ernie Field, and Dick Emerson, calling on their experience as veterans of the U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division, decided to initiate search-and-rescue operations and created the Grand Teton Rescue Team, later renamed the Jenny Lake climbing rangers. Having come from an Army division of skiers and climbers who trained in the Colorado Rockies and on Mount Rainier before heading into combat in the Italian mountains, these men realized the benefit of hiring experienced climbers for seasonal positions in the park. Feeling that it would be easier to teach climbers to be rangers than rangers to be climbers, they advertised the job to elite climbers as a chance to be paid to spend time in the mountains.

Since its inception in 1948, the team has been considered the best in the business, the crew that set the standard for mountain rescue throughout the country. In 2003, Renny Jackson was their leader.

A world-renowned climber who began his career as a Jenny Lake ranger before Erica Summers, the unresponsive woman on the top of Friction Pitch, was born, climbing is the only real job Renny has ever had. Born in 1952 outside Salt Lake City, Reynold Jackson grew up hiking and exploring in the mountains of Utah with his parents. On picnics with his family at Big Cottonwood Canyon southeast of Salt Lake City, he became fascinated watching climbers maneuvering around on quartzite. He particularly found it interesting, as he says, to “get on top of something” and began climbing as a teenager, taking a beginner’s course through the Wasatch Mountain Club in 1969.

The Wasatch Club was fairly serious about new climbers learning the basics, and there was nothing theoretical about its classes. The students dropped weights out of trees, for example, to test the limits of what they could hold with a standard hip belay. Rather than reading about how to climb, they got outside and practiced—team arrests, boot-axe belay, body rappels, self-arrests from every imaginable position. The lessons in self-arrest involved the novice climbers dressing in the slickest ski suits they could find and sliding as fast as possible headfirst down a hill. Occasionally, the instructors would mix in some safety protocols and put the students on belay during those sessions.

The Wasatch Club brought Renny to the Tetons, where he summited the Grand for the first time at age 19. His primary skills as a climber were limitless tenacity and an uncanny ability, even as a beginner, to cling to the rock. His willingness to spend all of his time climbing didn’t hurt, either paying off in a phenomenally quick learning curve. While other climbers took the winters off, Renny trained year-round.

After attending the University of Utah, Renny accepted a seasonal position on a trail crew at Park City West (now called the Canyons Ski Resort) near Park City so he could spend the summer climbing in the Tetons. His foot in the door to becoming a ranger at Jenny Lake was working on trail crews there in 1974 and ’75. On his days off, he climbed with the rangers and made sure they knew that his goal was to work with them.

At age 24, in 1976, he became a Jenny Lake climbing ranger, and he never looked back.

Renny was employed as a seasonal ranger at Grand Teton National Park until 1989, working search and rescue patrol at nearby resorts in the winter off-seasons. Quickly establishing a reputation as one of the preeminent climbers in the Teton range, he began tackling routes that had never been climbed before. He made the first winter ascent of the South Buttress of Moran, claimed the steep Emotional Rescue route on the north side of the Grand’s Enclosure, and was a team member on the first winter Grand Traverse. While most rangers tend to move around the country, working for various national parks, Renny devoted his career, except for a two-year stint in Denali National Park in Alaska, to the Jenny Lake rangers.

Renny is the rare kind of individual who not only identified exactly what he wanted to do at a young age but also successfully engineered a life around that passion. The freedom that accompanied the ranger position, the relationship with his surroundings, the sensation that transcended mere

being in the mountains and shifted to a feeling of belonging to the mountain's whole both satisfied and sanctioned his yearning to build his life around climbing. None of it was done for glory or fame and certainly not for money. Renny's emotions about the job were akin to the way some professional athletes feel about their sport: he did it simply for the love of the game.

Earlier on in his climbing career, about five years after becoming a seasonal ranger, Renny spent a summer morning climbing Mount Owen with friends. It wasn't an exceptional climb; there was a lot of ice and snow on the mountain, and it was a gray, cloudy day, but his friends brought along a striking brunette named Catherine Cullinane, who possessed nearly unparalleled technical climbing skills. Right away, there was an attraction between Renny and Catherine. According to her, she was totally smitten by his dazzling hazel eyes and slow, dry wit. As for Renny, he fell for her whole package.

Catherine's obsession with mountaineering rivaled even Renny's. Her dad had been in the 10th Mountain Division in World War II, so climbing was in her blood. She had grown up fly-fishing, backpacking, hiking, taking burro trips in the Sierra Nevada, and she had enrolled in technical rock climbing courses as a teenager. She bounced between college in Humboldt and climbing in Yosemite, then balanced nursing school in Southern California with working as a climbing guide in the Teton region, becoming Exum's first female guide.

After that first climb together, Catherine ran into Renny at the ranger station, and he asked her out, but he had an off-again, on-again girlfriend at the time. Catherine dated Renny intermittently over the next few years, but the old girlfriend kept resurfacing. By the winter of 1985–86, with Catherine Jackson working as a nurse at the Teton Village Clinic at the ski area, she and Renny were finally, by all appearances, together as a couple. Still, he wouldn't completely commit to her. It took Catherine telling him that she couldn't handle the relationship anymore and heading to Tibet for three months—where she helped make a film for the BBC on the history of George Mallory and an adventure film for ABC Sports—for Renny to realize how much he missed her. When he knew she was about to head home from the trip, Renny traveled from Wyoming to her parents' house in Montclair, California, and was there waiting for Catherine when she arrived, declaring his love for her and his desire for a future that included her.

They were married on a ranch in Jackson on September 11, 1988, the year of the Yellowstone fire. The whole area had been hazy from the smoke all summer, but on their wedding day, it snowed, which, in a metaphorical sort of fresh start, cleared the air and started putting the fires out.

Renny and Catherine were the ultimate climbing power couple, celebrities in the climbing world, traveling the globe and summiting the most challenging peaks, especially in Asia. Renny had found one of the few women in the world who wouldn't hold him up on a mountainside. Catherine understood Renny's inability to wear his wedding ring in the traditional manner—so as not to lose part of his finger in a mountain crack—and supported his decision instead to wear his ring on a cord around his neck (along with a medallion of Saint Bernard, the patron saint of alpinists). They were extraordinarily well matched as climbing partners—she arguably possessed stronger technical skills, but he was braver on lead. Every July on Catherine's birthday, they climbed the Grand together.

The year after their marriage, 1989, was a tough one for Renny. There was no opening for a permanent ranger in the park, so he and Catherine left their beloved Tetons to move to Alaska, where Renny had been offered a year-round ranger job at Denali National Park. In 1989, Renny was planning a third summit attempt of Everest, but his father died, and he called it off. Renny had climbed Mount Everest twice in the past—once in the early '80s, he had ascended close enough to see the top of the world before accepting that he had to turn back; then, in 1987, he had tried again, but a jet stream moved in toward the end of the climb, and no one in his group summited. Shortly after Renny's father's death, Catherine was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

In the midst of his grief, disappointment, and fear for his wife, Renny met the challenge, organizing a climb with Catherine to the top of Denali (also known as Mount McKinley), the highest mountain in North America. To pull it off, he designed a fleece and neoprene patch for her insulin vials so they wouldn't freeze.

By 1991, a position had opened in the Grand Teton National Park, so Renny and Catherine returned home, and Renny became a full-time, year-round Jenny Lake climbing ranger. In February 1991, they bought a house in Kelly with a geodesic dome and a view of Indian Head and Sheep Mountain. Renny wasn't wild about the dome initially, but he came around. In August of that year, their daughter, Jane, was born.

Renny was always a very involved father, attending Jane's school activities when she was little, helping her assemble a butterfly collection, taking her swimming in the river, and, inevitably, teaching her how to climb. Every one of Jane's spring breaks and school vacations was a climbing trip. Renny's daughter was privy to a side of him beyond the effortlessly competent leader showcased to climbers throughout the world. Her experience was of a dad who took his family on adventures that she calls, "typical climber lingo, epics."

With Jane, Renny occasionally miscalculated the time of a hike or lost the trail. She was benighted (spent an unplanned and unexpected overnight stay in the mountains) with her dad in a wilderness area in southern Utah when she was eight, rappelled (essentially walking backward, facing the rock, down the side of a mountain) from a slot canyon in Zion with him long after dark when she was 10. While these exploits have not affected her love of climbing, they have taught her always to pack a headlamp.

As time went by, Renny eased up a slight bit, agreeing now and then to take a family trip that wasn't centered around climbing, as long as it was active, and every five years or so, consenting to take a three-day trip to see family in California. For the Jackson family, a vacation was never going to involve lying around on a beach.

Once he became a permanent ranger, Renny even began to take the occasional day off that did not involve climbing, although this "rest day" usually encompassed some sort of long hike or backcountry patrol. Every so often, he would work on the yard or various projects around the house, but he was so fixated, such a perfectionist, that he would usually start full-on, get sidetracked, and end up leaving tasks unfinished. He did sit still long enough to read and study history, however, and managed to parlay this interest into a climbing angle, too, literally writing the book on climbing in the Tetons, a classic guidebook with topographical maps entitled *A Climber's Guide to the Teton Range* (now in its third edition) with Leigh N. Ortenburger (who perished in the Oakland, California, firestorms of 1991).

All of Renny's time as a ranger in Grand Teton National Park has been in the Jenny Lake subdistrict. Every subdistrict in the park has rangers, but some work as road-patrol or lake-patrol law-enforcement rangers. The park rangers are responsible for a variety of tasks, from making visitor contact in ranger stations to resource management dealing with, for example, bears. There are also biotechs who conduct, among other duties, campsite inventories.

In the Jenny Lake subdistrict of the park in 2003, during peak season—June to August—the Jenny Lake team was made up of 16 rangers, four of whom were permanent, year-round park employees. Although most of the rangers were seasonal employees ("seasonals"), because of the enormous level of responsibility involved in the position, no one ever thought of it as a summer job.

All of the Jenny Lake rangers spend their time educating, helping, and rescuing climbers and hikers in the mountains, but the permanent employees, and sometimes a few of the seasonals, are also law-enforcement rangers with extra training and law-enforcement commissions. In addition, several of the rangers (two in 2003, now three) have specialized emergency medical skills.

The application to become a climbing ranger (as opposed to a park ranger) contains an additional

objective set of standards relating to climbing experience and expertise, but the job is so highly competitive that all of the Jenny Lakers radically exceed the minimums. Applications are so plentiful that Jenny Lake can demand the full package—a candidate who is experienced, a world-class climber on both rock and ice, incredibly physically fit (a given once they have secured the climbing résumé) and ideally conversant with basic EMS skills.

Of the 16 rangers in 2003, all but two—who focused on backcountry patrols—climbed as a routine part of their job. Those 14 were hired with a screen-out factor requiring them to have climbed and led climbs at a certain technical level. It was those rangers alone, the ones with the climbing prerequisites contained in their job descriptions, who were permitted to call themselves Jenny Lake climbing rangers.

There is no confusion about the lure of the job to climbers, with the concentration on climbing not merely a perk of the position but a requirement. The rangers rotate shifts at the rescue cache in Lupine Meadows and put in time at the ranger hut on the Grand's Lower Saddle, but three times a pay period meaning three times in ten days, they set off on mountain patrols. These are paid climbing days, which the rangers are free to roam anywhere and climb whatever routes they want, as long as they stay in the park. The idea is to give them as much direct experience as possible so that they have ultimate credibility to dispense pertinent information about climbing routes to park visitors. Since they are climbing constantly, they can also provide up-to-date details about the conditions on various parts of the mountains. The rangers consider the climbing patrols to be preventive rescue. To the extent possible, when climbers visit the ranger station, the rangers try to match skill levels with appropriate routes and climbs.

There are other benefits to the paid climbing days, too. The rangers obviously need to maintain their climbing skills and, moreover, as hard-core climbers say, to “feed the rat,” satisfying the insatiable need to climb. In addition, it is a huge advantage for the rangers to be intimately familiar with complicated and perilous terrain where a rescue could occur on a moment's notice. To this end they are also out in the mountains on their days off, gaining firsthand knowledge of the geology and climate of the Tetons and the myriad crevices where hikers and climbers could become lost.

The climbing rangers smugly refer to the position as a job in which they are paid to climb, but it is not necessarily the right fit for all climbers. Climbers have traditionally held themselves out as fair-weather rebels, and not all of them want to work for the government. As a year-round Jenny Lake ranger, Renny certainly found the law-enforcement component his least favorite part of the job. In addition, as chief ranger, part of Renny's duty was to insulate the other rangers from bureaucracy, despite his own weakness regarding all things administrative. His strengths, however—a quiet, calm management style, poise under pressure, the skill to band individuals together as a team—more than compensated.

While not into self-promotion, and despite making it clear that he was a climber before he was a ranger, Renny was nevertheless an instinctive leader. More essential than his considerable climbing skills, the vaguely indefinable quality of mountain judgment was his biggest asset as a ranger. The higher the stakes in a rescue, the more composed Renny became.

Renny was focused, no doubt, but his intensity tilted toward the taciturn. Although his style was what could only be considered the low-key side of laid-back, the rangers under Renny's command listened to him unswervingly. With his low, measured voice, he dispensed compliments to each of them based on their own specific talents. He was constantly striving to achieve in all aspects of his life—to climb more difficult routes, to improve his supervisory skills—and the rangers working under him didn't miss that. As a climber, Renny was steady and safe but also visionary, not satisfied with standard routes, always looking beyond them to discover new lines. As a leader of men, he operated the same way.

As head ranger, Renny was exhaustively, maddeningly, all about the details. He took his time

thought things out. He did not rush, and he did not get rattled. He rarely lost his temper. When he did become angry, either with Catherine or with a situation at work, Renny expressed it with fierce calmness. As a boss and as a father, he was strict, believing in consequences and valuing efficiency, responsibility, and, above all, honesty. On the flip side, his sense of humor was so cynical, so irreverent, and his delivery so deadpan that it sometimes required a double-take to determine whether he was joking. He has always been, Catherine admits, “a little complicated.”

Adding to Renny’s impenetrable and fairly enigmatic nature, decades of summers have been marked and measured for him in terms of tragedy. The first fatality in the Teton range was in 1921 when Theodore Teepe died after tumbling down the glacier that now bears his name. The range currently averages about 100 rescues a year, spanning a range from twisted ankles to fatalities. Most of the call-outs fall somewhere in between—injuries from rockfall, rappelling accidents, ice- and snow-related slides, tumbles down descent gullies.

Depending on the season, about 20 to 35 of the rescues are considered major, meaning that they cost more than \$500. Under that definition, any rescue in which a helicopter’s rotors spin is a major one. Even a small technical rescue can often count as major. If there is a sprained knee or a dehydrated hiker in Cascade Canyon, for example, it can require overtime. Every year, approximately three to six people die in the Tetons.

The rangers generally use the helicopter about 10 times a summer, with approximately five of those times involving a short-haul procedure. Since short-hauling is used more frequently to extract patients than to insert rangers, aside from endless training exercises, in an average season, there are usually only one or two occasions for a pilot to short-haul a ranger to a scene.

On the evening of July 26, 2003, the short-haul maneuver was used a total of 13 times—to extract seven patients and to insert six rescuers.

The Jenny Lake climbing rangers are real-life rescue heroes, men whose office supplies are stashed with ropes, ice axes, and helmets. They are team members of the most elite and experienced climbing search-and-rescue team in the country, trained not just in technical climbing but also in altitude rescue—emergency medical care, setting anchors, raising systems, patient packaging, and high-risk helicopter operations.

The rangers certainly don’t receive much monetary compensation, and the seasonals receive no benefits in the traditional sense of that word. There is hazard pay and holiday pay and overtime, but the permanent rangers fall into the GS 7–9 levels of the government pay scale, with base year compensation just north of \$30,000 a year. Seasonal employees work only from the end of May until September, and pay at a GS 5 level, where many park employees start out, is \$12 an hour. Park garbage collectors, compensated according to a different pay schedule, are paid more.

In any event, the climbing rangers know that they are ultimately paid not so much for what they do as for what they have the potential of having to do.

The commonality of experience keeps the rangers intensely linked—to the mountains, to the job, to one another. The solidarity is also secured with the shared bonds of confronting trauma together on a near-daily basis. In terms of physical gore, it doesn’t get much more revolting. All of the rangers have had to collect body parts strewn about the mountain and wrap them up together as neatly as possible.

Many rangers have been faced with the daunting task of scraping brain matter off the mountain and, if unable to push the material back into the skull, packing it separately (in sandwich bags in the early days) rather than tossing it loose into the body bag. In the scope of emotional trauma, the dead victims whom the rangers are forced to package are almost never sick or old. The fatalities are overwhelmingly vibrant and athletic individuals—hikers struck down while on vacation, climbers killed while pursuing their passion.

Despite the cost to them psychologically, the rangers always do what they can for the victims

small, respectful acts of kindness and compassion, to try to facilitate the healing for those left behind. On one occasion, rangers loading the body of a married man into a bag realized that his wife would need to see him one last time, would want to hold his hand again. On the side of the mountain, they removed saline, gauze, and paper towels from their packs and painstakingly washed the blood off his fingers.

Every ranger copes with the trauma differently. Some abuse alcohol, some turn inward, a few quit. But there is extremely low turnover among the Jenny Lake rangers, leading to a level of experience and maturity virtually unparalleled in other search-and-rescue teams.

Returning seasonal rangers are fairly rare in other national parks. There is more upheaval, for example, at Denali and Mount Rainier. It is extremely draining—on finances, on relationships—for most rescue personnel to maintain long-term summer employment. As the job only provides income for five months, the seasonals have to find other work to support themselves for the rest of the year and structuring a career that accommodates an extended summer break every year is generally not an option. By necessity, the rangers end up taking any job that enables them to protect their Jenny Lake schedule. They are forever crashing with friends or living in their cars during the shoulder season between summer ranger duties and whatever job—frequently ski patrol—they can find to pay the bills that winter.

Longevity at Jenny Lake comes from loyalty, history, knowledge. There is a place, a community, a sense of belonging to a collection that is greater than its separate components, its individual rangers. Their link is immune to divergent backgrounds, personalities, education, social class, age, geographic roots. These tough mountain men are sensitive, compassionate, and occasionally moved to tears when describing what it means to them to be Jenny Lake climbing rangers.

The rangers throw the word “brotherhood” around frequently but not casually. It is spoken with reverence. Central to their outlook is their core belief that at Jenny Lake, they are truly accepted for who they are and respected for what they do. Their various skills and strengths are appreciated, their weaknesses acknowledged. All points of view are entertained. Everyone has a voice, and each of them knows that he is heard.

Just as in the pursuit they worship, the climbing rangers need not be connected by a thick rope. Their lives revolve around, and depend upon, a thin strand of triumph and tragedy. Very few people in their adult lives have experienced a bond like that, but these men have seen it, felt it. The reason all these alpha dogs are able to work cooperatively is that they are all climbers at heart, sharing a love of any label containing the word “vertical,” participants in a vertical ballet, players in the same vertical chess game. Some are cockier than others, and they are all relatively antiestablishment, but for the most part, they defy the type A assertive stereotype and instead just sort of keep to themselves.

If lone-wolf climbers can ever be described as a team, it is during lifesaving mode in the midst of chaos. Aside from the danger—and the rangers have to compartmentalize the danger—a rescue is an endeavor involving practically all of their climbing buddies. They get to hang out with their friends, try out the coolest toys. They have a ton of fun, but they never lose sight of the reality that it is a very serious game they are playing. In the end, as much as they all love to climb, they do what they do to save lives. The personalities just more or less sort themselves out.

These are men who understand each other implicitly, who know that their shared passion for the job flows well beyond the traditionally recognized and socially ordained “acceptance of risk” to something much more profound: the seeking of risk.

In 2003, the team hadn't had any turnover for three years, with most rangers averaging 10 to 15 years on the job. Several rangers involved in the Friction Pitch rescue—Renny, Leo, Dan—had been working together for more than a quarter-century.

The physical conditioning, plus the stress, involved in the duties of a climbing ranger would see

to make it a young man's game, but that wasn't necessarily the case with the 2003 Jenny Lake rangers. Many of them were in their 40s and 50s, and although stories of climbers sharing girlfriends are legendary within the climbing community, most of these guys had long settled down with wives and children. All of the rangers' children tended to be pretty amazing climbers and skiers, whether they wanted to be or not. Jim Springer took his kids on canyon patrols; Dan Burgette brought his kids along on certain rescues.

By 2003, decades of training and executing hundreds of rescues side-by-side unquestionably provoked the rangers' seamless execution, their highly polished, nearly choreographed moves. They often finished one another's sentences, both literally and in a figurative sense. When one of them required a certain tool, another ranger often already had it out and was handing it over. They didn't always socialize after working hours, and there were definitely cliques within the team. To say that a few of them didn't like one another outside of the job was certainly an understatement, yet, interpersonal dynamics aside, they all quite readily trusted one another with their lives.

Although Catherine's life has ultimately revolved around Renny's work as a ranger, often a source of frustration if not outright fear for her, she has never forgotten what drew her to him in the first place. "He's very funny, you know? So funny, that's what got me, totally worked on me. He made me laugh until I was rolling on the ground. I always remember the quality I *had* to marry him for." While she didn't dwell on the danger Renny faced with each rescue, pleas for help came at all hours, and she was not unaffected by Renny's need to drop plans in his personal life for the sake of his job.

When the call came in about the accident on Friction Pitch, Renny was home watching Jane while Catherine was working a 12-hour shift as a labor-and-delivery nurse. Ironically, not realizing the enormity of the incident, it was a rare time that Catherine not only didn't bail Renny out, but she didn't even have sympathy for his predicament. She was furious at him for having to respond to the rescue on, as she says, "the one day" he was supposed to be watching Jane. When Renny called her, she hung up on him. "You figure it out," she said. "I'm at work."

Renny called in a favor with a neighbor who agreed to look after Jane, threw some chocolate bars and Mountain Dew into a pack, dropped Jane off, and headed to work. The drive from his home to Kelly to the rescue cache in Lupine Meadows takes 25 minutes. He made it there—flashing lights and sirens in his police vehicle—in 12 minutes flat.

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