

*All That  
We Carried*

*a novel*

ERIN BARTELS



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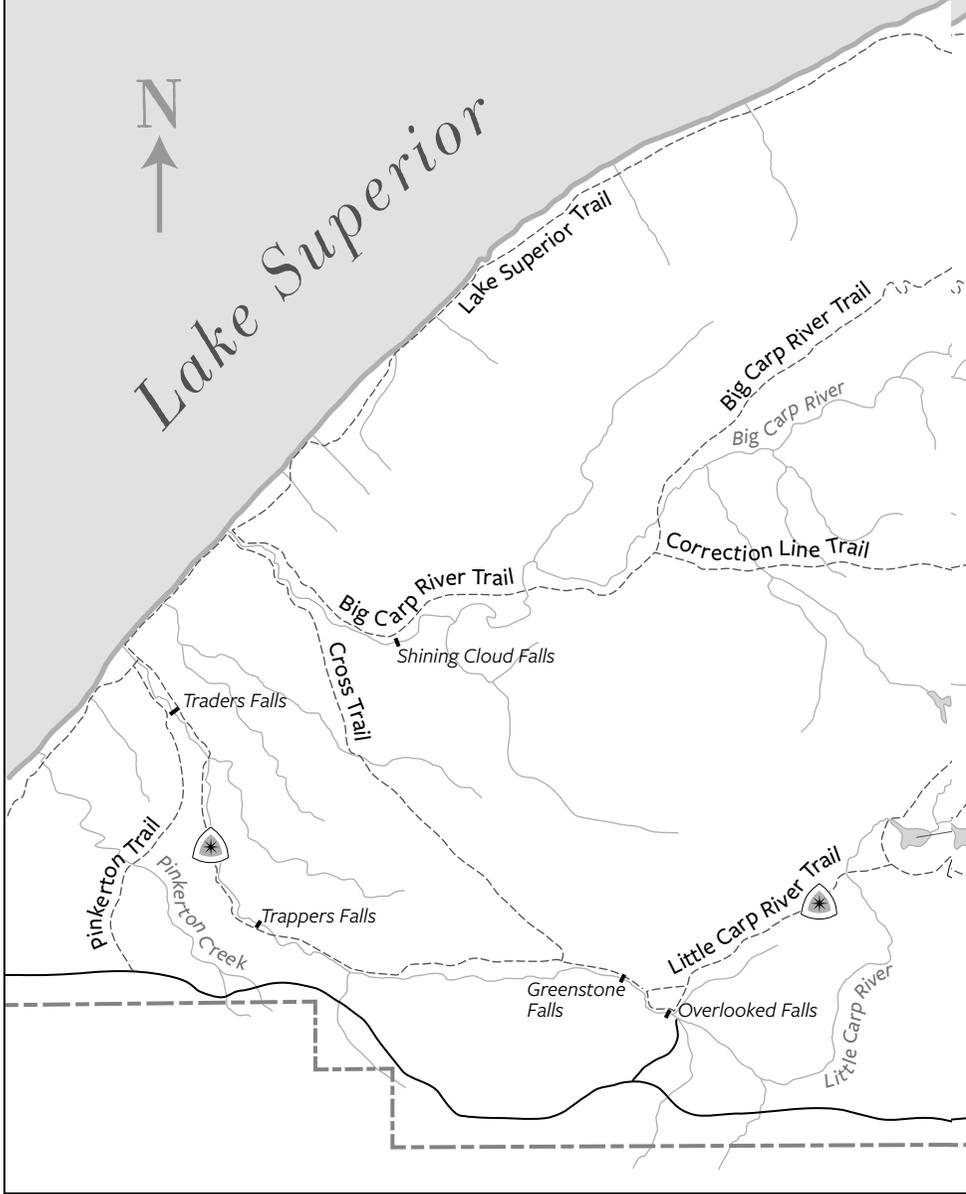
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*For Alison, naturally*

# PORCUPINE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STATE PARK

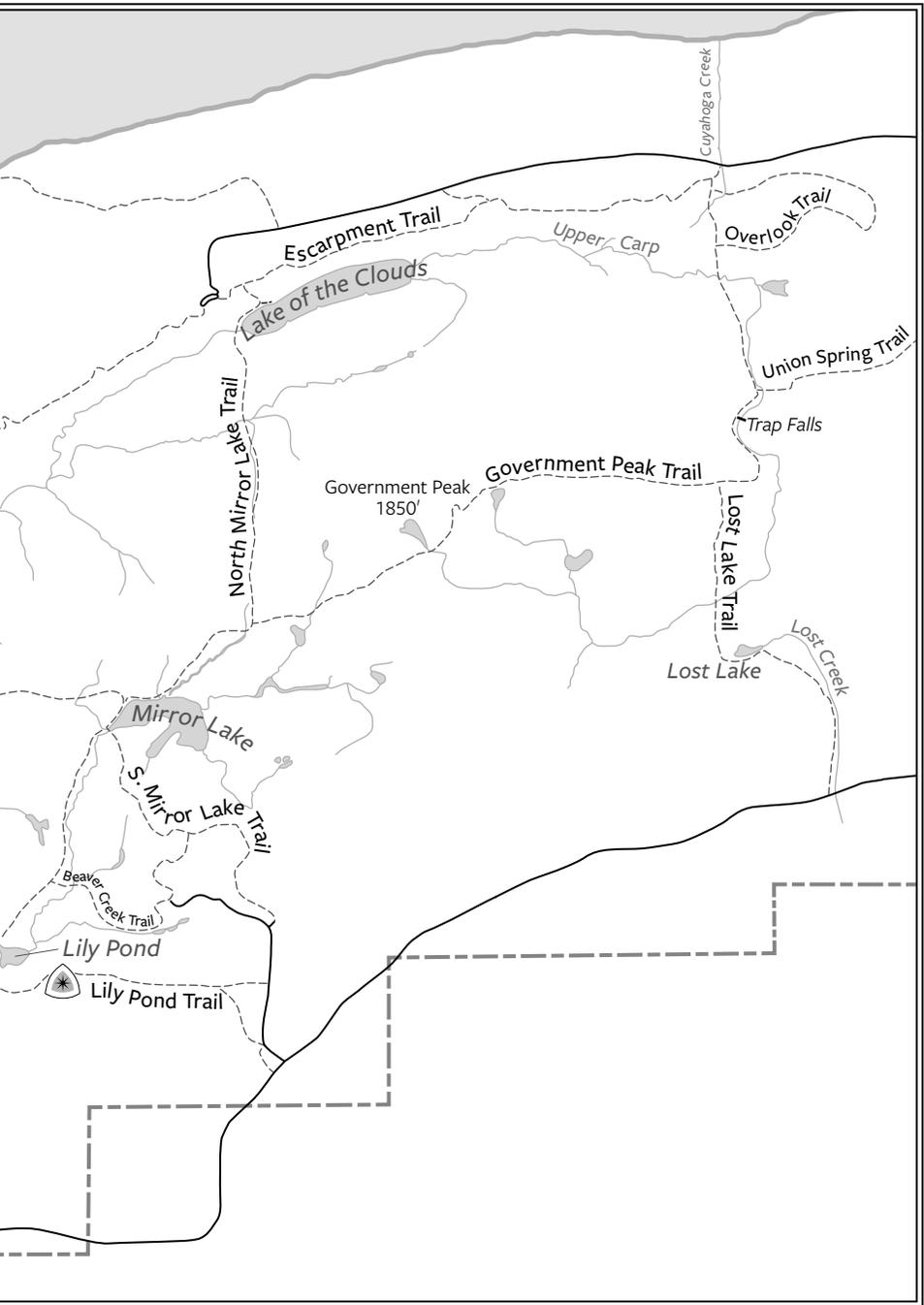


Lake Superior



Erin Bartels, All That We Carried

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# *One*

MIDWESTERNERS DO DUMB THINGS on the one nice day in March. The thought that winter might indeed have an end makes them giddy, unpredictable, and more than a little bit stupid. They wear shorts, make big plans, believe that this—finally—will be the year they get in shape or go to Paris or write their screenplay. And much like you wouldn't hold a friend to a promise they made while emerging from the effects of anesthesia after surgery, Olivia Greene felt that her sister had no right to hold her to the promise she'd made on that unseasonably warm day seven months ago.

Melanie had called at lunchtime when Olivia would not be in court and would therefore have no excuse for letting the call go to voicemail as she normally would. The sun had just broken through the rushing clouds, lighting the towering smokestacks of the power station south of downtown like columns of a Greek temple. Mists lifted from the low places along the road that were still cradling crusted snow. And at that moment, after an unsatisfying lunch at a mediocre restaurant with two colleagues she didn't much care for, Olivia had felt just restless enough to

agree to a weeklong backpacking trip with the younger sister she hadn't seen in a decade.

That Melanie chose a hike, she couldn't quite understand. Hiking had long been ruined for her.

Now as she pulled off the highway and into the gas station lot where they had agreed to meet in Indian River, Olivia wished that day had been as miserable as the rest of March always was. If it had been sleeting, she never would have agreed to this nonsense.

She didn't know what kind of car her sister drove, but she didn't bother looking for her either. Melanie wouldn't be there yet, despite living only a half hour away. Instead, Olivia got out of the car, rubbed her hip, which was sore from the long spate of sitting, and went into the gas station. The sprawling shop had the normal gas station fare — pop, beer, candy, salty snacks — but it also sold accoutrements for three distinct, though at times overlapping, markets: veterans, hunters, and those passionate about right-wing politics.

She made haste to the bathroom, sure that everyone she passed knew she was out of her element. She'd done her hair that morning and put on makeup because that's what she did every morning, and while she was dressed in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, she suspected they were brands you could not get at any store Up North. She washed her hands and wondered if she should buy a camo baseball cap to fit in. Of course, where she was going it wouldn't matter. She wouldn't be seeing many people, and of those she did see, she guessed that at least half would be young professionals like her, dabbling a bit in nature, thinking that a walk in the woods would solve their problems.

Olivia knew better. Problems like hers couldn't be solved.

She snagged an iced tea out of the cooler and passed a rotating case of hunting knives on her way to the counter. A knife. She'd forgotten to buy a knife at the sporting goods store at the mall when she was stocking up on gear for the trip. She didn't know exactly what she might need one for. She only knew that if she didn't have one, a need would present itself. She looked over the knives on offer, eliminating those with Confederate flags, divisions of the Armed Forces, or nationalist sentiments on the handle, until all that was left to choose from were animals. Whitetail deer, black bear, turkey, wolf, fish. A fish would do.

"Excuse me," she said to the woman behind the counter, "could I get the knife that says brook trout?"

The woman opened the case and extracted the knife Olivia pointed out. "You should get the one with the salmon," she said. "Salmon run's started."

Olivia just smiled and held out her credit card. She'd never cared for that half-crazed look of a spawning salmon—the eyes desperate, the scales turned a bloody red, the upper jaw looking for all the world like the thing would be screaming if only it had vocal cords.

"I guess you want the one with the state fish," the woman said, then she narrowed her eyes. "Where are you from?"

"East Lansing."

She nodded. "Heading to the cottage one last time for the year?"

"Hiking."

The woman looked her up and down and sort of shrugged, as if to say that the fact some suburban girl in designer jeans was going hiking wasn't her business, but she wouldn't be surprised

when the front page of next Sunday's paper sported a headline about a dead hiker. Natural selection and all.

"Around here? Or are you headed to the Upper Peninsula?"

"The UP, yes," Olivia said. She wished the woman would just ring up the knife and be done with it. A line was beginning to form behind her, though the clerk didn't seem to notice.

"Pictured Rocks?" the woman said.

Olivia winced. "No." She lowered her voice. She didn't really want to announce to a bunch of strange, burly men what remote place with no cell service she was headed for. "My sister and I are hiking the Porcupine Mountains."

"Hoo! The Porkies!" she all but shouted. "I hope you're ready for that." Then she gave Olivia a look that told her she was clearly not ready for that.

"We know what we're doing," Olivia said more tersely than she meant to. "We've hiked before."

The woman shook her head and finally rang her up. Olivia snatched up her things and headed for the exit.

"Watch out for bears!" the woman yelled.

Back at the car, she tucked the knife into a small compartment in her pack and looked at her smartwatch. 12:18. Melanie had not called or texted. She pulled both packs out and leaned them against the car, carefully so as not to scratch the finish. Though the trip had been Melanie's idea, Olivia had thought it best if she did the planning and the packing. It took her much of the summer, fitting it here and there into the cracks in her frenetic schedule. Mel's pack was lighter for the moment but would weigh more once she added her clothes and food, both of which Olivia would inspect before they set off, to ensure that

Melanie had adhered to the list she'd sent her back in July. She was about to lock the car when she spied the corner of something beneath the seat. She pulled it the rest of the way out.

The map. She had almost left the map behind.

Sure, they would have trail maps at the welcome center, but not like this one. Olivia had ordered it months ago. It was waterproof and tear-resistant, and she'd augmented it with additional details, clearly marking the trails they were going to take in pen. She'd emailed a scan of the map to her boss because she'd read that you should always make it known to others where you plan to hike and when you plan to return, so that if for some reason you *didn't* return, people would know where to look for you.

Her stomach churned at the almost oversight, and she had to sit down. Maybe the woman behind the counter was right to be skeptical.

"Ollie!" came a chipper voice, and Olivia looked up to see her little sister, strawberry blonde curls bouncing as she all but skipped up to the car. "I'm so excited to see you!"

Olivia stood to give Melanie a hug, keeping the map clenched firmly in her hand. Melanie squeezed her so tight her back cracked.

"Yikes!" Melanie said as she pulled away. "We need to take care of that!" She spun Olivia around and began to knead her shoulders. "You're all tied up."

Olivia shrugged away. "No point in fixing it now. I'll feel a lot worse in a few days."

Melanie dropped her hands for just a moment before crushing Olivia in a second hug. "I just can't believe I finally get to see you! It's been way, way too long."

Olivia felt her throat tighten. The last time she'd seen Melanie

was during the funeral and the week of dazed shock afterward. Now all of the emotions of that time—the fathomless grief, the exhaustion, the enormity of their shared loss—rushed in like a dammed river reasserting itself against the puny will of humankind. She gripped her sister with a ferocious possessiveness that surprised her—then she remembered the reason she’d avoided Melanie for so long. She let go and took a step back. “Let’s get these in your car. Did you already get gas?”

“I’ve got plenty of gas. I’m only twenty miles from here.”

Olivia looked at her watch but said nothing. They lugged the packs over to Melanie’s car, and Olivia started pawing through a reusable grocery tote in the back seat. “What’s all this?”

“What?”

“This.” She dug around. “Where’s the cheese? Where are the little packages of chicken salad and tuna I put on the list? And no jerky? How are you going to get enough protein?”

Melanie started tucking things back into the bag. “I’m a vegan. You know that.”

“A vegan? No, I didn’t know that.” Olivia felt herself looking at her sister the same way that dubious clerk had looked at her. “Did you at least stick to the clothing list?”

“I have what I need.”

“And everything’s in Ziploc bags?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I didn’t want to use all that plastic. It’s wasteful.”

“What if it rains?”

“I checked. It’s not supposed to rain. Anyway, aren’t the packs waterproof?”

“They’re *water-resistant*. But if they’re outside all night, they’re going to get damp. Even if it’s just with dew.”

“It’ll be fine.”

Olivia took a deep breath. “Let’s just get going. We still have a six-hour drive ahead of us, and we’re behind schedule as it is.”

“Okay,” Melanie said. “I just have to use the ladies’ room.”

She walked off—no, *ambled* off—toward the gas station. As unhurried as ever. When they were kids, Melanie was forever lollygagging behind, interested in a puddle or a rock or her own belly button. Olivia would be waiting on her little sister to catch up all week.

It felt like an hour before Melanie reappeared, but that was probably just because Olivia checked the clock so many times.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said when Melanie finally got in the driver’s seat. “Just head north on I-75 and I’ll tell you where to go from there.”

“I know how to get to the Upper Peninsula, Olivia.”

“I know you do. Sorry.” Olivia shrugged. “Once a bossy big sister, always a bossy big sister.”

Melanie pulled out of the parking spot and clicked on her left blinker.

“The highway is right,” Olivia said, pointing. “It’s right there. You can see it.”

“I thought we could go to the Cross in the Woods shrine first,” Melanie said, eyes gleaming and expectant.

“Why on earth would you ever want to go there?” Olivia said. “Did you become a Catholic?”

“No, but I try to make it a point to do something Catholic every couple months.”

“What? Why? No, never mind. It doesn’t really matter. We don’t have time for it.”

“But it’s just three minutes away,” Melanie said. “I passed it on the way here.”

“Well, maybe you should have gotten on the road earlier so you could see it before you were supposed to meet me, which was at noon, by the way, not 12:45. You obviously didn’t even leave your house until *after* noon. Now it’s almost an hour later than I had us scheduled to get on the road. And we still have to stop for dinner, and we’re not going to get to the motel until after eight o’clock, if we’re lucky.”

A car honked behind them. Melanie switched to her right blinker and turned right.

“Besides,” Olivia said, “there’s no popping in with Catholics. You’re either in or you’re out. No in between. Remember when we’d sleep over at the O’Neils’ and have to go to Mass with them? We never knew what was going on, and we weren’t allowed to do the bread and wine thing because we weren’t Catholic.”

Melanie pulled onto the highway and drove in silence for a moment. “I did leave before noon,” she finally said. “I had to stop on the way to get a turtle out of the road. And then I had to upload the video to my YouTube channel.”

Olivia bit her tongue. While she had been waiting, Melanie had been uploading a video of herself saving a turtle?

“It’s already got a bunch of comments,” Melanie continued.

And that was why she had taken so long inside the gas station. She’d been checking to see how many people liked her.

It didn’t matter, Olivia told herself. What’s done is done and can’t be undone—the phrase her mother used to say any time

Melanie broke one of her toys or ruined one of her books or tore one of her shirts. The phrase Olivia repeated to herself whenever she thought of what happened to her parents. What's done is done and can't be undone.

“I'm glad the turtle is okay,” she said.

Melanie smiled. “Me too.”