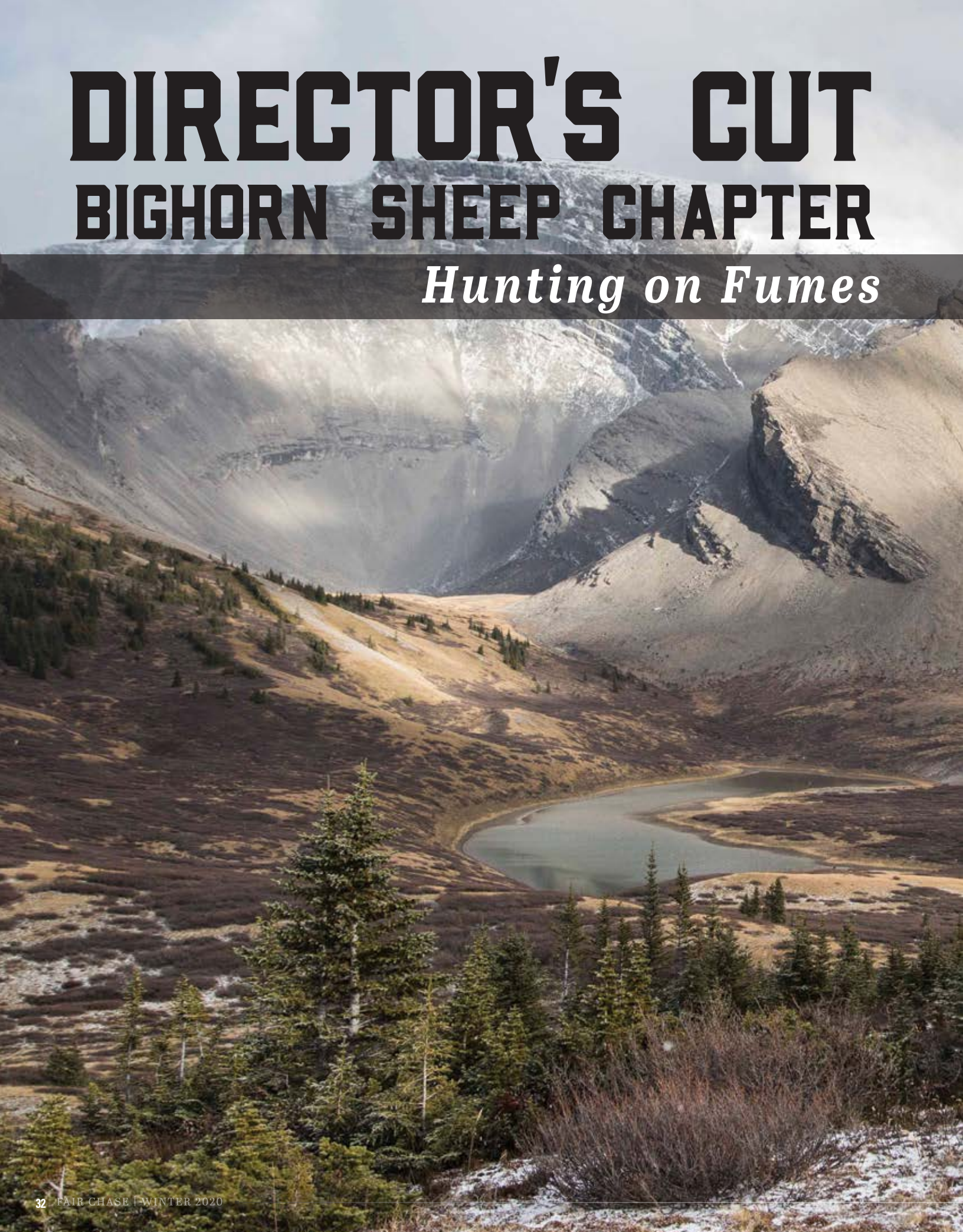
DIRECTOR'S CUT

BIGHORN SHEEP CHAPTER

Hunting on Fumes



CHRIS DORSEY

Excerpt from the book, *Director's Cut, Big game hunting through the lens of the largest outdoor TV producer in history*

When you climb into the Alberta mountains in search of a bighorn, there is only one question you must answer. *Are you willing to do what it takes?*

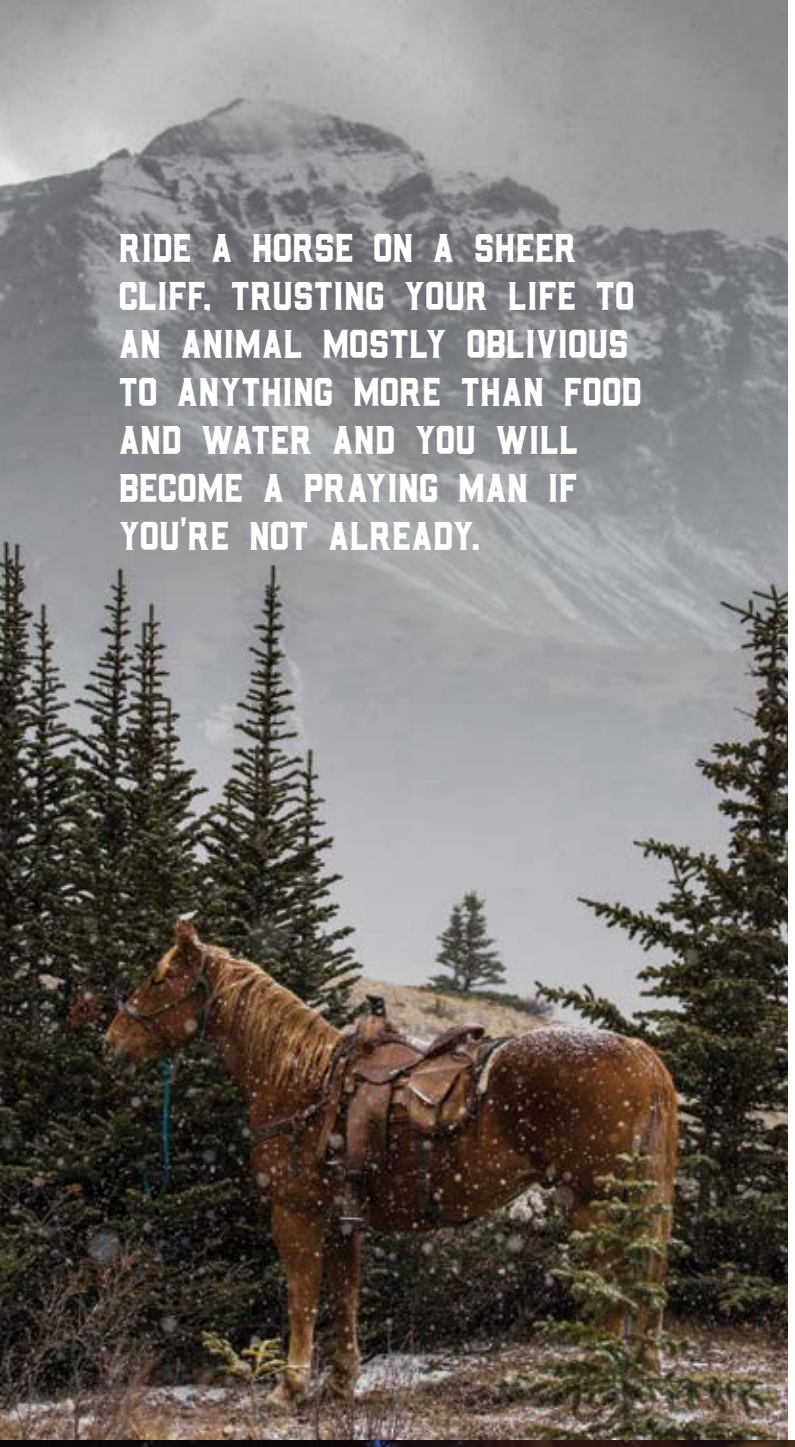
"There is no half way," wrote Jack O'Connor. "After his first exposure, a man is either a sheep hunter or he isn't." I held that quote in my heart as a daily test of what kind of hunter I was as I first hunted sheep in my 20s. It was a Stone's sheep hunt in the glorious mountains of northern British Columbia, a low-budget, ragged affair as sheep hunts go. It was the only kind I could afford—a backpack foray to the top of the mountain with only what we could carry on our backs. We drank and cooked with glacial meltwater, slept on thin pads and hiked our assess off from one sheep pasture to the next like young wolves in desperate search of a meal.

Chris Dorsey, left, and guide, Cam Fancy left the trailhead in a mule-drawn wagon striking out to find sheep.

We ran out of food seven days into the ten-day trip but we stayed on the mountain anyway, surviving on a bumper crop of blueberries as we grazed alongside the abundant grizzlies drawn by the same riches. I had lost 13 pounds at that point—from an already lean 5'11" and 145-pound frame. I was half delirious from lack of protein and quality sleep when we finally encountered a legal ram on day ten. In the glow of the last light of the day, I shot at the ram as it stood broadside in front of a large boulder about 300 yards away. At the crack of the rifle, it bolted to the west, and I thought I had shot over it, for I could see a puff of rock dust rise over its back. But just as I was about to fire another round, the ram spun in a circle and collapsed in a heap. The ram was dead and so was I, nearly.

We deboned and packed up the beast and staggered down the mountain until we hit timberline where we could find enough wood to make a fire. We roasted his loins and tore into the half-cooked flesh like savages, and it was the greatest mutton I had ever tasted. Actually, it might have been the finest meat I've ever eaten.

Now, more than 20 years later, I am standing at a trailhead outside of Alberta's Banff National Park, getting ready to ride deep into one of the most stunning wildernesses in the world in search of Rocky Mountain bighorns. Jagged, snow-covered peaks frame the horizon with layers of river valleys, foothills, and sheep pastures in between. The Ansel Adams setting is, on one hand, an inviting wildscape unrivaled in my North American experience. On the other hand, it is an unforgiving terrain fraught with peril. If you want to hunt sheep,



however, it is a prescription for the perfect habitat.

After an hour of packing and re-packing, we left the trailhead in a mule-drawn wagon striking out to find gold in them thar hills—gold in the form of sheep that ounce for ounce runs about the same price as the precious metal. The mules are a little shy of a Clydesdale in size but are nonetheless massive, the kind of beast whose kick would break the jaw of any grizzly that got too close in these parts. Modern transport moves people so quickly nowadays; in 15 hours you can go from standing in America's largest city to sitting next to a Kalahari bushman 8,000 miles (and seemingly a century) removed. For that reason, it's nice to pace yourself and enter game country on foot, or hoof as the case may be. It gives you time to absorb the surroundings—and these environs are straight out of a Rungius landscape—snow-capped peaks skirted by sprawling spruce forests and streams you can drink from. We are mule-drawn pioneers chasing dreams and hope, just as it should be when pursuing one of the continent's great game animals.

For six hours we traverse this raw landscape, winding through river bottoms, navigating around giant deadfalls and over river rock to get to a tent camp so far from civilization that the concrete jungle almost seems a distant memory, as if part of another planet more than a different piece of the same continent. And we've come to test ourselves in some of the hunting world's toughest terrain. As Sir Edmond Hillary once wrote, "It is not the mountains that we conquer but ourselves."

When I approach a tent camp, there is a flood of emotions that have been dormant since my last wilderness foray. Memories of communing with a campfire in the hopes of better understanding the universe, thoughts of bears and ungulates that I have pursued in the wildest land on Earth, the recollection of sleeping fitfully after sending a bullet into an animal I will have to recover in the morning, Lord willing. And I can't forget the camaraderie and many friendships that have stood the test of time because we were a team in one of life's epic endeavors in a place where only bears, elk, or wolves could hear us talk in our dreams.

Start a fire in a wilderness camp, and there is suddenly balance in the universe. Of all the advancements of man, have any been truly more important than fire? Sit in a wilderness camp with a night's chill descending upon you, and tell me otherwise. Fall asleep to a wood stove popping and hissing in a mountain camp, and you drift into an amniotic slumber in Mother Nature's womb.

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ABOVE: Chis knows the mantra of all mountain hunters; climb and glass, and glass some more. RIGHT: Later they climb to a new location to spend the night, half a foot of snow has fallen. Their sleeping quarters consist of little more than a tarp and sleeping bags.

I came here, in part, to disconnect from one world and to reconnect with another—the one that means the most to me, and the one that calls to me each autumn like a siren. I'm never so alive as when I'm living the elemental life in the wilderness, a no-frills existence where the most basic of items are luxuries, and where no comfort is taken for granted—be it a warm fire or a reliable horse.

The difference between a good horse and just a horse is the difference between roulette and Russian roulette. For veteran outfitter Scott Carter, horses are client and gear transport as well as bear alarms, which is to say they are critical to the whole mission—which might explain why he has the best horses I've ever encountered in all my years of traversing the peaks. Most of the mountain camps I've visited have been the habitat of half-broken, renegade steeds that you tended to fear more than any grizzly in the area. I've had them stumble and collapse under me, bolt at the slightest whiff of predator scent, and try and brush me off against a tree as if I was little more than an annoying oxpecker. Still others have taken me down a one-foot wide trail on the side of a mountain with a 500-foot drop below. Ride a horse on a sheer cliff, trusting your life to an animal mostly oblivious to anything more than food and water and you will become a praying man if you're not already.

Mountain guides who head into the wilderness for months on end are a throwback breed, genetic leftovers from a Russell Annabel tale of harrowing adventures. Truth is, most are addicts; they can't give up the mountains any more than most suburbanites can abstain from Starbucks. For Cam Fancy, a seasoned mountain guide, his motivation is about sharing a wilderness adventure with those who revel in the whole experience—not merely the quest to kill a sheep.

Horses take you up the mountain but seldom get you all the way to the sheep that roam far above timberline, well beyond reason. Wild sheep pastures are so seldom visited by man that sheep will sometimes stare at you when you encounter them. It's as if they sometimes don't know what to think, for you can tell they're trying to identify what you are in their limited experience. If you're not a bear or wolf, they often don't care what you are, for they seldom have reason to fear anything else.

Our first ride up to sheep country stops at about 9,000 feet where we tether the horses to begin the rest of the climb to sheep territory. We take our time hiking, then resting...climb and rest, climb and rest some more before we get to a bald knob from where it's possible to see for miles. As we reach the precipice, we see before us dozens of sheep grazing lazily about. Several young rams but mostly ewes and lambs fill the view, perhaps 40 in all. Despite the lack of mature rams, we take it as a good omen to be among so many sheep so early in the quest.

Chris Dorsey and Cam Fancy (right photo, left) pause to admire the hard-earned ram. Ten days of ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, fatigue and exuberance and the quest ends in a remarkable few seconds.

Despite not finding a ram, I remind myself that there can be no quit in a sheep hunter, for if you enter a hunt with doubt, you will not do what is required to get a ram because they do not come easy. You must face the task with a belief that you will do whatever it takes to make the shot happen. That is a sheep hunter's emotional contract from the outset—or should be.

We return to the horses and load up to strike off to yet another valley. As we arrive, we watch an old boar grizzly working around a lake with a puff of cloud above it as if a postcard, the kind you might find at an airport gift shop in Vancouver. Step into this view and you feel you may be the first to ever lay human eyes on it. Fact is, you might be. Your spirit lifts when you walk in the clouds, and why wouldn't it when you're that much closer to heaven. Therein lies the narcotic of sheep hunting for those who cannot get enough. We sit from this high vantage glassing the surrounding sheep country until a storm front rolls in, bringing with it bruised clouds delivering heavy snowflakes that start slowly and build into what looks like the first shake of a snow globe. It's time to leave to make it to yet another sheep pasture in daylight, in time to set up a spike camp, build a fire and make dinner. We ride off with an inch of snow built up on our backs thanking the good Lord for Gore-Tex and Thinsulate.

Fire transforms a camp and provides salve for the psyche, for by the time we climb to a new location to spend the night, half a foot of snow has fallen. Our sleeping quarters consist of little more than a tarp and sleeping bags but with a fire and two fingers of whiskey there is nothing but optimism as verses of Jack London echo through my mind—along with a little Willie Nelson taking me back to my personal highlight reel with, "To All the Girls I've Loved Before." I don't so much sleep this night as hibernate, wrapped in the warm memory of the carefree existence of my youth.

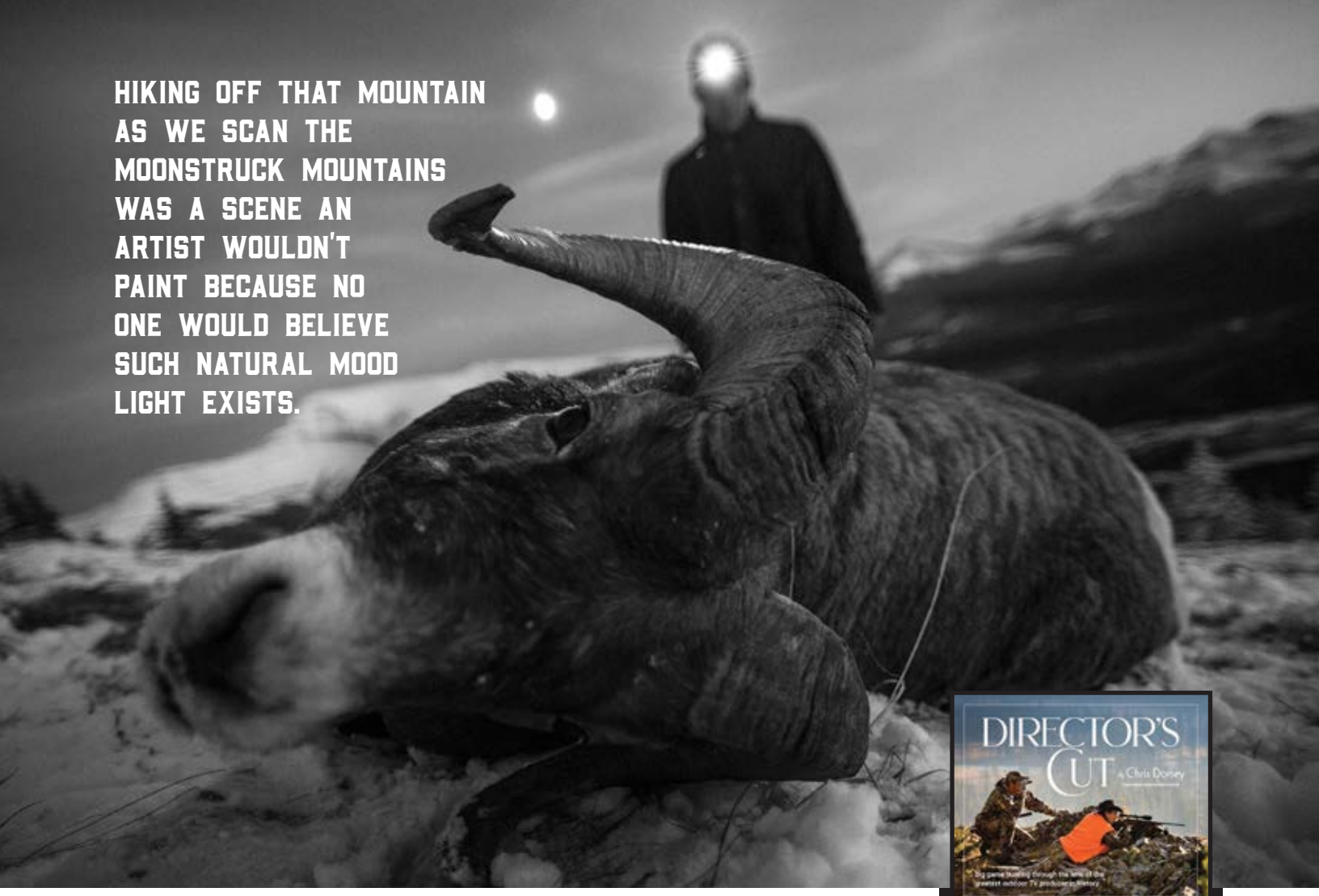
The next morning, the fog and snow end and the mountain shines with enough glaring sun to make a solar panel squint. We finish breakfast of instant oatmeal and peanut butter toast, load up our packs, empty our bladders by writing our names in the snow, and begin hiking from the edge of timberline into sheep country. We're nine days into the hunt and have yet to see a legal ram, so optimism is tough to come by. What is a hunter to do? You do what's required—the mantra of all mountain hunters. We climb and glass, and glass some more. We spy a couple of ewes but little else, save for a few ravens and whiskey jacks following us in case gravity gets us and they can pick our bones like nature's tax collectors. Little bastards.

We descend down the mountain to move to another camp several hours' ride further down the valley. The sheep have to be somewhere, and with a fresh layer of snow they will be easier to spot now. As we get off the mountain where we had just spike camped, I spin around to give the slope one last look only to see three dark dots standing far atop the mountain.

"I don't remember those dark spots up there," I say as I reach for my glasses and Cam sets up his spotting scope.

"They're rams...maybe two shooters," says Cam as he peers through his scope that he hastily mounts on a tripod. "The third one might be a shooter too. I'll be damned, where the hell were they when we were up there?"

While we had just spent four hours coming down from sheep country, we decide to backtrack and return to the mountain from where we had just descended. It's one thing to blindly climb a peak in search of a ram, it's far better to climb when you know there's a ram—like a cherry—on top. Another five leg-cramping, lung-busting hours up, and we are down to the last hour of daylight, but we have arrived back to the sheep pasture where we last saw the rams from afar. And while the high-country pastures seem bald and exposed, there are numerous undulations in the terrain that can make it tricky to see a ram that's only a couple hundred yards away. Thus, we walk the ridge carefully looking below in all directions trying to spy the sheep before they see us. And after our arduous climb back up, they could have moved two mountains over for all we know. We are losing daylight and the



HIKING OFF THAT MOUNTAIN AS WE SCAN THE MOONSTRUCK MOUNTAINS WAS A SCENE AN ARTIST WOULDN'T PAINT BECAUSE NO ONE WOULD BELIEVE SUCH NATURAL MOOD LIGHT EXISTS.

thought of having just expended the energy to bust ass up this mountain one more time for nothing sat like a hernia in my gut.

Then, just as we decide to head back to the protection of the timber and build camp yet again, I catch a glimpse of something moving below us, mostly hidden by the curve of the slope. We hustle downhill to get an improved angle to see what was moving, and there, just above the bend of the horizon, we can see the heads of the three rams, their bodies still shielded by the terrain. We hunch down and shuffle toward them as they trot 200 yards away into an exposed flat below, seemingly unsure what we are or what danger we might pose.

"Call it," I say as I throw my pack to the ground and lay on it to use it as a rifle rest.

"Middle one...no, the last one."

In an instant, the ram collapses to the shot. Ten days of ups and downs, emotional highs and lows, fatigue and exuberance and our quest ends in a remarkable few seconds. Cam and I look at each other in disbelief, eyes wide and mouths agape.

"Did that just happen?" How a marathon big game hunt can pass like an interminable wait in a doctor's office and then, in a few seconds, be over is one of the altogether shocking elements of the pursuit. Which is why being ready for those few seconds when fate smiles is everything to the big game hunter, for she seldom smiles twice.

The ram's chocolate coat and heavy horns against the snow is an indelible image, the monarch of the mountains that requires everything you have as a hunter. And when you put your hands on a ram, you will know a satisfaction and gratitude only understood by the sheep hunter. As we pack it out, the full moon transforms the landscape from white to blue. Hiking off that mountain as we scan the moonstruck mountains was a scene an artist wouldn't paint because no one would believe such natural mood light exists. It is a hunt for the ages, and a piece of me will always remain on that mountain. Perhaps Muir was right after all when he wrote, "Going to the mountains is going home." ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: This essay is adapted from Chris Dorsey's new book, *Director's Cut, Big game hunting through the lens of the largest outdoor TV producer in history*. The book and companion film set is more than a decade in the making with the world's greatest sporting photographers and cinematographers. The 400-page, full color landscape hardcover book and four-hour DVD set is an unprecedented celebration of the world of big game hunting by one of the world's most widely traveled hunters. A limited premier edition of 200 signed and numbered books and companion DVDs along with an accompanying giclee by renowned artist John Seery-Lester is available for $250. A limited leather bound deluxe edition along with companion DVD set is available for $175 and the collector's edition and companion DVD can be purchased for $75. Visit the Sporting Classics store at sportingclassicsstore.com or call toll-free 800-849-1004 to order your copy today.