

THE CRUX

by

Steve Gannon

Based on the short story "The Crux" by Steve Gannon

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FADE IN:

1 EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY 1

A white CHEVY TAHOE travels a deserted dirt road.

2 INT. WHITE TAHOE - DAY 2

MIKE RYAN (late 20s) is driving. GORDO, a yellow Labrador retriever, sits beside Mike, enjoying some petting. The rear of the vehicle is crammed with climbing equipment and camping gear.

Mike passes a sign that reads, "City of Rocks National Reserve."

Mike's CELLPHONE RINGS.

As the landscape passes outside the car window, Mike grabs his iPhone.

MIKE

Mike Ryan. (beat) Hold on a sec.

Mike pulls off the road and shifts into park.

MIKE (CON'T)

What's up, Wolfe? (beat) You're not coming? Who am I supposed to climb with? (beat) Bellagorski? I don't trust that guy, bro.

MIKE (CON'T)

(sharing a granola bar with Gordo)

Because he's a psycho, that's why. (beat) Whatever. (beat) Where am I supposed to meet this guy? (beat) Yeah. Later.

3 INT. WHITE TAHOE - DAY 3

Mike drives into City of Rocks, slowing as he spots a number of cars parked at the base of a rock wall. A group of ONLOOKERS stand there looking up.

Mike pulls in and parks.

4 EXT. PARK CAMPGROUND - DAY

4

MIKE  
(exiting the Tahoe)  
C'mon. Gordo.

Mike joins the crowd, spotting a LONE CLIMBER on the wall about 100 feet up. The climber is about to surmount an overhang at the top.

MIKE  
(to onlooker #1)  
What's going on?

ONLOOKER #1  
Some guy's free-soloing. No rope.

The climber completes the final crux move, making it look easy.

ONLOOKER #1 (CON'T)  
Damn, that guy's good.

Standing on the summit, the climber looks down, spotting Mike.

CLIMBER  
Hey, Mike! Come on up.

MIKE  
(to himself)  
Without a rope? No way,  
Bellagorski.

5 EXT. REMOTE CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

5

Mike and BELLAGORSKI (early 30s) are sitting by a campfire at the base of a towering rock wall. Gordo is lying beside Mike.

Bellagorski is drinking directly from a TEQUILA BOTTLE. Mike is nursing a BEER and stroking Gordo.

Two TENTS, BEER CANS, and a short-handled LATRINE SHOVEL are visible in the dim light.

MIKE  
I've never camped this far out  
before.

BELLAGORSKI

No one does.

MIKE

What was up with that climb you  
free-soloed today?

BELLAGORSKI

What about it?

MIKE

Seems a little crazy.

BELLAGORSKI

You calling me crazy? 'Cause if  
you are, we've got a problem.

MIKE

Chill, dude. I'm just saying . . .

BELLAGORSKI

I know what you're sayin'. You're  
sayin' you're a pussy.

MIKE

I don't need to prove anything to  
anybody. Especially you.

Bellagorski chugs tequila and pokes the fire, sending a shower  
of sparks spinning into the night.

BELLAGORSKI

You've never hung it all on the  
line, have you?

Mike stares into the fire without responding.

BELLAGORSKI (CON'T)

It's called commitment, Mike.  
Without it, you don't know what  
you'll do until something forces  
you to find out.

MIKE

Maybe. I still think you're crazy  
climbing without a --

BELLAGORSKI

(bolts to his feet)  
I told you. Don't call me that.

Mike rises and faces down Bellagorski, then heads for his tent  
without responding.

6 EXT. REMOTE CAMPSITE - MORNING

6

A pan of the campsite shows a CAMP STOVE and CLIMBING GEAR strewn about. Mike peers out of his tent.

Bellagorski is sleeping in a CAMP CHAIR, sprawled by the remnants of the fire. Beer cans litter the ground nearby. The nearly empty tequila bottle drops from his lap.

Mike kneels, grabs his rope, and closes his camp stove. Bellagorski jerks awake.

BELLAGORSKI

Where do you think you're going?

Mike picks up his gear and stands.

BELLAGORSKI (CON'T)

I thought we were gonna climb today.

MIKE

I don't climb with psychos.

Mike turns and starts walking. Scowling, Bellagorski reaches for the short-handled latrine shovel.

7 EXT. REMOTE CAMPGROUND - MORNING

7

Mike looks back to see Bellagorski rushing in, brandishing the latrine shovel.

Bellagorski backhands the shovel at Mike.

Mike blocks the blow with the camp stove. The shovel strikes the stove, knocking it from Mike's hand. The rope, shovel and stove drop to the ground at their feet.

Bellagorski wrestles Mike to the ground. Bellagorski tries to choke Mike. Following intense grappling, Mike turns the tables, straddles Bellagorski, and delivers several devastating punches to Bellagorski's face.

Mike cocks his arm for a final blow, but hesitates. Bellagorski lies helpless beneath him. Mike shoves him away and stands.

Shaken, Mike kneels and resumes packing his CLIMBING GEAR, keeping a wary eye on Bellagorski.

Bellagorski rises and walks slowly to his tent.

8 EXT. REMOTE CAMPGROUND - MORNING 8

Bleeding from his nose and mouth, Bellagorski flips up the hood of his sweatshirt, kneels, and reaches into his tent. He grabs a pair of SUNGLASSES and puts them on.

Bellagorski again reaches into the tent and withdraws a PISTOL. He racks the slide.

Pistol at his side, Bellagorski starts walking toward Mike.

9 EXT. REMOTE CAMPGROUND - MORNING 9

Mike sees Bellagorski approaching. So does Gordo. Gordo GROWLS and bolts toward Bellagorski.

MIKE  
(standing)  
Gordo, no!

Bellagorski raises his pistol and shoots Gordo. The sound of the GUNSHOT echoes across the campsite, finally dying away to silence.

Mike rushes toward Gordo. Bellagorski blocks Mike's way.

Mike stops. For a long moment he stares down at Gordo's body, his face filled with shock.

BELLAGORSKI  
Gonna cry for me, Mike?

Slowly, Mike lifts his eyes to meet Bellagorski's. We see Mike's pain.

MIKE  
Fuck you.

Once more Mike tries to approach Gordo. Again Bellagorski blocks his way.

MIKE  
What? You gonna to shoot me, too?

BELLAGORSKI  
You won't be the first.

MIKE  
 (taking a step back)  
 Easy . . . bro.

BELLAGORSKI  
 Is that what we are, Mike? Bros?

Mike doesn't respond.

Bellagorski glances at the rock wall.

BELLAGORSKI (CON'T)  
 I'll give you a chance. Let's see  
 some commitment. Climb the  
 wall . . . bro.

10 EXT. ROCK WALL - DAY 10

Mike is about forty feet up the wall, moving precariously on tiny flakes and nubbins.

Mike looks down. Bellagorski is watching from the base of the climb, sitting in a CAMP CHAIR. He has a beer in one hand, gun in the other.

11 EXT. ROCK WALL - DAY 11

A SERIES OF CLIMBING SHOTS shows Mike completing several difficult climbing moves. He is nearing the safety of a small ledge.

12 EXT. ROCK WALL - DAY 12

We hear a GUNSHOT. Mike ducks as the rock wall beside him explodes, sending shards of stone flying.

Mike almost falls. Somehow he hangs on.

Mike makes it to the safety of the ledge. He looks down at the campsite. Gordo's still body is sprawled several yards behind Bellagorski, who is still lounging in his chair.

BELLAGORSKI  
 (yelling up)  
 Can't stay there forever, bro. And  
 there's no down-climbing this one.





17 EXT. ROCK WALL - DAY 17

As the sun crests the horizon, Mike finally attains the summit.

Mike looks down, hoping Bellagorski hasn't been awakened by the sound of the rockfall. The camp below remains silent.

18 EXT. REMOTE CAMPSITE - DAY 18

Mike descends a walk-off route and reaches the ground.

Mike threads his way through trees and approaches the campsite, spotting Bellagorski's tent.

19 EXT. REMOTE CAMPSITE - DAY 19

Silently, Mike reenters camp. Gordo's body is still missing.

Mike peers into Bellagorski's tent. Bellagorski is asleep. His pistol is partly visible in a backpack beside him.

Mike grabs the pistol and kicks Bellagorski awake.

MIKE

What did you do with Gordo?

BELLAGORSKI

(rolls over, then grins)

Gimme me back my gun.

Mike keeps the pistol leveled at Bellagorski.

MIKE

I'm going to find my dog. And I'm keeping your gun.

20 EXT. REMOTE CAMPSITE - DAY 20

Mike kneels at the spot where Gordo died. He sees a blood puddle there. A blood trail leads away, with drag marks leading into the trees.

Following the blood trail, Mike finds Gordo's body in a copse of aspens above camp. Gordo lies still, covered in blood.

After a long, terrible moment, Gordo's eyes suddenly open. His tail thumps weakly. He is still alive -- for now.

Mike kneels and gently strokes Gordo's head.

21 INT. WHITE TAHOE - DAY

21

Mike and Gordo are in Mike's van. Gordo lies in the back. Mike shifts into reverse and checks his sideview mirror. Something catches his eye. He looks up.

Mike spots Bellagorski climbing the wall. Bellagorski has already progressed a good distance up.

Mike hesitates, staring up at Bellagorski.

Mike shifts into reverse and starts to back up, then stops.

Frustrated, Mike comes to a decision. He slams the shift into park and twists off the ignition.

MIKE

(looking into the back of the van)

Hang on, Gordo. I'm gonna get you to a vet, but there's something I've gotta to do first.

22 EXT. REMOTE CAMPSITE - DAY

22

BELLAGORSKI

(yelling down)

Where you going with my rope?

Mike stands at the base of the wall, a climbing rope slung over his shoulder.

MIKE

(yelling up)

I'll anchor it at the top. You're gonna to need it.

BELLAGORSKI

You think I'd trust a rope you tied off?

MIKE

A crux is impossible now. A foothold broke loose. Wait on the ledge. I'll come back and get you down.

BELLAGORSKI

Ain't gonna happen, asshole.

Bellagorski resumes climbing.

23 INT. WHITE TAHOE - DAY  
(INTERCUT W/ SCENE #24)

23

Traveling shots show Mike's car leaving City of Rocks. Mike glances into the back. Gordo lies still, barely breathing.

Mike screeches to a stop in front of a rustic building.

MIKE exits the Tahoe and races up the front steps of the building. A SIGN posted on the wall reads "Veterinary Clinic." Mike opens the door and leans inside.

Moments later Mike rushes back to his car, followed by a female VET (late 50s) and her male ASSISTANT (early 20s). Mike opens the back door of the Tahoe.

As the vet climbs into the van to examine Gordo, we see that he is still alive. Mike joins the vet from the other side of the car, cradling Gordo's head.

24 EXT. ROCK WALL - DAY  
(INTERCUT W/ SCENE #23)

24

Bellagorski completes the chimney climb. His movements are a poetry of precision and grace, and watching him climb, we can almost forgive his cruelty.

Bellagorski pauses beneath the crux overhang.

Bellagorski leans out over the void. Mirroring Mike's earlier climb, he makes several dynamic moves and gets a hand on the overhang.

He gets his other hand on the overhang and swings out over the drop. There is now no going back.

In a FLASHBACK SEQUENCE, we hear the sound of Bellagorski's voice at the campfire.

BELLAGORSKI (FLASHBACK V.O.)

You've never hung it all on the  
line, have you? It's called  
commitment, Mike.

BELLAGORSKI (FLASHBACK)

Without it, you don't know what  
you'll do until something forces  
you to find out.

Back on the crux move, Bellagorski extends his left leg, searching for a foothold that is no longer there. His foot scrabbles, finding nothing. He tries to get his foot back on the wall. He can't.

In a second FLASHBACK, we hear Mike's voice echoing up, calling from the base of the wall.

MIKE (FLASHBACK)

A foothold broke loose. The crux  
is impossible now.

Bellagorski dangles. He can't progress; he can't retreat. Slowly, his hands begin to slip.

MIKE (FLASHBACK V.O.)

(As Bellagorski struggles, we  
again hear Mike's warning)

The crux is impossible now . . .  
The crux is impossible now . . .  
The crux is impossible now . . .

Bellagorski stares at the rocks below. The sound of his HEARTBEAT slams in his chest.

Finally realizing his situation is hopeless, Bellagorski takes one last breath and releases his grip.

We watch from BELLAGORSKI'S POV as the ground rushes up to meet him.

At the bottom of the fatal fall we:

SMASH CUT TO BLACK:

FADE OUT.

THE END