

## Chapter 1

### Remy

#### Manaslu, Monday September 4, 2006: 12:07 p.m.

Mount Manaslu has finally stopped fighting us, gone as soft as her name. The wind has dropped and the loudest sound up here on the summit is the crunch of my father's boots in the snow.

I'm tied to an ice axe anchored in the ground, shifting from side to side, trying to get warm. It's like standing in a freezer. My nostril hairs are stiff. My breath hangs on the air like a cluster of ghosts that won't fade away.

Nick, my father, is tied to me for safekeeping as he walks around the summit, taking photos from every side: the jagged, silent Himalayan world of rock and ice and cloud, the peaks of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna off to the west. The bases of the smaller peaks are hidden by clouds, and the valleys look like dry ice-filled bowls in a magician's lab. The deep blue sky all around us contrasts starkly with the black and white mountains, the grey snakes of frozen rivers.

There are other climbers on those other mountains, even some on this one, but for these few minutes I could believe we're alone on the planet, just me and Nick.

"It's been a while since we climbed together, so you may be unaware of my summit tradition," I tell him.

He turns to me. "Yeah?" Traditions are important, serious stuff.

They're tucked carefully in an inner pocket of my jacket, the two yellow-and-red polka-dotted party blowers. I wave them at Nick, who lets out a laugh that turns into a cough.

"No," he says.

"Oh yes. Plus self-portrait." I gesture him over.

“Jesus Christ.” But he trudges up to me, rubbing at his forehead under his wool hat, and takes one of the blowers with a grimace.

I hold up the camera and on my count of three, we blow our whistles as I take the shot. Not easy when you both have the laughs. In the picture, it’s hard to tell us apart: we’re wearing the same goggles and burgundy jacket, the two of us distinguishable only by the grey streaking Nick’s black stubble, and my Snoopy hat. Jocelyn’s hat, previously. A gift from me, returned. Six months ago she stuck it through my mailbox after I broke up with her, along with a sketch of me with no mouth or eyes and the words *WHO ARE YOU*. I knew it was me only because of the Snoopy hat. On the back, she’d written *Letting someone get close wouldn’t kill you. P.S. Snoopy is for kids. Grow the fuck up.*

Oh well. When she started mentioning marriage, I knew she just didn’t understand me at all.

“So that picture’s going straight to Sophie,” I say, tucking the camera away. Sophie is Nick’s biographer. Or strictly speaking, the ghost-writer of his autobiography.

“Must I throw that camera over the edge?” Nick is still smiling as he reaches into his pack for the satellite phone and clicks in the number, clumsy in his gloves. It’s fifteen digits but he knows it by heart. When my mother answers, he turns away from me for some privacy but alas, there’s not much of that on a six-foot-square patch of rock and snow.

“Hi from the top of the world, my love.” Nick sounds breathless—at twenty-six thousand feet, there isn’t much in the way of oxygen, either.

Isobel says something in reply, her voice a small, faraway squawk, back in Vancouver.

“Snapping some shots, then I promise we’ll head down. How are you?”

During the walk-in, we stood in the town of Lho and looked up at the peak where we would be spending the next few weeks. Nick said Manaslu, with its two summits, looked like a pair of tits. I still think it looks more like a broken tooth, but he has breasts on the mind. Isobel has been Nick's climbing partner for more than three decades, but four months ago, a double mastectomy of the stage-III-cancer kind slowed even her down.

I was there at the Sunday dinner when Nick told her he was going to postpone their Manaslu trip because she didn't feel up to going with him.

"Don't be *loco*." She always sounds more Argentinean when she's mad about something. "Go."

"I don't want to go until you're ready."

"Who knows when that will be? Why would you waste the deposits and the permit and all the sponsorship money? *Go*."

"You're the one being *loco*," Nick argued back. "Am I supposed to climb it solo?"

"I could go," I said. "Instead of Ma."

They both looked surprised, as if they'd forgotten I climb mountains, too. That I'm a mountain *guide*. Who works for them. It's just they always seem to have some secret joke between them, so wrapped up in each other they forget anyone else exists. Something like that with someone, someday, would be nice.

"Oh," Nick said, voice shot through with doubt. "I guess that could work."

So it's been just he and I, a two-man team flying up the mountain, travelling light. On my first trip with him in years, I've rediscovered how similar we are: our pace, our fitness level, our ways of doing things. True, we've bickered, such as about his singing "Ooh La La" by The Faces off tune and off rhythm and incorrectly over and *over*, to the point where I thought I'd kill him. I

finally cracked at Camp Two: “Will you shut the hell up with that?” Which only made him sing it more, because that’s how he is. He’s also spent a fortune in satellite phone time, calling my mother. But at Camp Three, I had to agree when he said, “Great trip, kid.” He shoved me in the shoulder, playfully but hard enough that I took a step backward. “Somewhere along the way, you grew up or something. Not such a little punk anymore. You’re okay.”

“Thanks,” was all I let myself say. Finally. All these years: building my stamina, watching him to learn what a good leader is, teaching myself how to hide my feelings when I would have preferred to punch a client or colleague. I didn’t think anyone had noticed.

“We’ll call you from camp, Bela,” he tells my mother now. “Wait, want to talk to Remy before we hang up?” He glances my way. In his mirrored glasses I watch the reflection of myself giving a little shrug, mouth turned down, a “not necessary” shake of my head. Isobel says something and Nick replies, “Right, yeah, it is expensive. Sure, chat to him later. Go rest up. *Te quiero, mi amiga,*” then he clicks off the phone.

“How is she? What’s the news?” I ask.

“She says the plastic surgeon showed her a model of the new boobs and I’m going to love them.” He laughs.

“You just had to make it weird, didn’t you.”

Smiling, he stands with his face turned up to the sky for a minute, eyes closed, phone hanging to his side.

I give him a moment before I push up the sleeve of my jacket to check my watch. I don’t want to leave, but we have to. “Time to head down, old man.”

He reaches behind himself to slip the phone away into a side pocket of his rucksack. The pack is a new model he’s testing for a gear company. The Wayfarer, it’s called; a play on our

surname, Lavoie. It comes only in blue because they took a photo of him and used the blue of his eyes. I'm still on the fence about whether that's cheesy or cool.

"We got enough pictures of the sponsors' banners?" he asks.

"Enough to bring home the bacon bits," I reply.

"I would kill for bacon bits right now."

"Would you accept Gatorade instead?" I hand him the still-warm thermos, take a slug after he does, then tuck it back into my own pack. It's a struggle to heft the rucksack over my shoulders because everything is a struggle up here. The pack pulls on my shoulders as if coaxing me to sit down in the snow. *Just stay here. You know you want to.* It's true: I never want to descend off a peak. But I unclip myself from the ice axe and yank it out of the snow, then turn to Nick to check the rope that connects us.

"I happen to have hidden a pack of bacon at basecamp," he says as I ensure the spare loops of cord on my harness are in easy reach in case of crevasse falls—we'd need them to climb up the rope. "We can make it down tonight."

"Thought we were going to overnight at Camp Two."

"We'll see how we feel when we get there," he says, which means no, which means he'll pull rank and insist on going all the way down the peak.

Well, he's the one with the creaky knees, not me.

We take one last moment with the view, then Nick tugs on the rope and nods in the direction of basecamp. Nowhere to go but down.

Before every step I give the ground a good, hard jab with the ice axe, checking for crevasses, avalanches lying in wait, hidden trip-you-up rocks, because making the summit only means you've climbed half the mountain. An hour goes by. We walk in an easy, mindless

rhythm. The wind picks up a little, but not enough to drown out the jingle of gear on our harnesses, rustling nylon of our jackets and pants and gloves, the squeaking snow under our crampons. Nothing exists in the world except walking. Head down. Poke with the axe. Step with the left foot. Step with the right. Repeat. Nick's reassuring tug comes down the rope behind me every now and then. Walking with earphones, he'll be blasting the playlist I put on his iPod for him—*Nix Mix*, it's called: every Beach Boys and Byrds song I could get my hands on, some Stones and Beatles because Nick loves them equally, a little Supertramp and Fleetwood Mac. Neil Young, Jimi, Creedence. If it's Classic Rock or Psychedelic, Nick will love it. He scrolled through my climbing playlist one day, bewildered. "What's a Bjork? Who the hell is Radiohead? The National what? Oh, The Cure for bad music?"

Strange not to be the one at the back, but he insisted I lead this climb. That was nice.

Two hours below the summit, Nick yells, "Rem."

I stop, turn. "What?"

"Why did the squirrel cross the road?"

"I don't know—why?"

"Because it was stapled to the chicken."

The lower Nick's blood sugar level drops, the worse his jokes become. Some say we have that in common. I pull out the Gatorade and the crackers and wait for him to catch up. We stand together, crunching, looking up at the peak we've just left.

"Jesus but it's been a year," he says without preamble.

The cancer; some tight finances; their dog dying suddenly of a stroke.

"Feels like it's taking a turn for the better, finally," he adds.

He waits for me to agree, but I frown at him. I say, “*Guh tuh vuh gashay*” and scratch my backside at the same time. We learned it from an old Turkish climber, a saying to ward off the evil eye: when someone says anything that could tempt fate—such as, “oh, this climb should be easy”—everyone in the vicinity has to perform the ritual.

“We don’t need to *guh tuh vuh gashay* that,” he says.

“Well, I did it, so now you have to or it’s uneven.”

Nick rolls his eyes. “That’s not how the universe works.” But he does it. “I’m hoping—*hoping*, Fate, are you listening, hoping,” he adds, to the sky, “that the last big thing is Isobel’s surgery, then we can coast for a bit.”

Her reconstruction surgery will be two months from now.

“Speaking of, though,” he goes on. “Almost straight after her surgery, I’ve been asked to guide a trip to K2, along with Nigel Shepherd.”

Annapurna? Done. Nanga Parbat? Dicey, and someone in his party died, but eventually he conquered the peak. Everest? He’s climbed it four times, up different routes. K2? The score thus far stands at Nick zero, K2 three.

I glance at his profile as he gazes up at the summit we’ve just left. “Nice. You always have a blast climbing with Nigel. You two are like Laurel and Hardy.”

“Wait, who’s the fat one?”

I laugh.

He takes another cracker. “Problem is, again, it’d be right after Ma’s surgery.”

“You know she’ll say you have to go.”

“She will,” he says. “And I’m tempted—it’s good money, which we need after this crappy year, not to mention it’s probably my last go at K2 given I’m staring sixty in the face. So I wanted to ask you something.”

“Anything.”

“If I went, could you stick around? So she has at least one of us there, you know, to drive her around, fetch and carry, blah blah?”

...Anything but that. “Me?”

“You’re the only kid she has, to my knowledge.”

“You’re talking April?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

Damn. That’s peak Himalaya season, which of course is why he would be coming back to the Himalayas. Yes, it’s the season when I earn my biggest fees—the season that sets me up for the year—but that’s not the biggest issue: for someone who lives for being up high, staying grounded during Himalaya season might kill me. What’s more, I bet Isobel would rather hire a nurse than have me around. But at the same time, she’s my *mother*. How can I even contemplate saying anything but yes, immediately, unthinkingly?

Trying to pick my way through the wrangle in my head toward the right words, I stay quiet for a beat too long.

“You didn’t really pitch in much during her treatment,” Nick says, voice casual, but the underlying rebuke stings.

“Hey, I offered, over and over, but she always wanted *you* to do everything for her. I couldn’t even bring her a cushion right.”



“That’s not fair. She was in a lot of discomfort at the time, she wasn’t herself. Plus you know what she’s like—she’s so independent. Finds it hard to ask for help. Likely it just felt easier to ask me.”

The first retort that rises up is *No, she’s just always that way with me*. I bite it back.

“So,” he goes on, “it would be nice if maybe this time you could be the guy, you know, the one who’s around.”

The bloody nerve. That wasn’t a sting; that was a punch in the face.

I don’t reply but he must be able to read me, because he demands, “What?”, irritably. “Jesus, Rem, I’ll cover whatever fee you’d be missing out on—how’s that? Would that make you feel better?”

“I don’t care about the money.”

“Then what’s the matter with you?”

“*I’m* always around.” This is more than I’ve ever said about it, out loud. Nick always says altitude acts like a truth serum: in the thin air, there is no energy for lies.

“What does that mean?”

I dare to take it a little further: “It takes two to tango, that’s all.” But apparently I still have energy for the usual veils, filters, softenings.

“Luckily you’re both Argentinean.” He punches me in the arm, grinning now.

He doesn’t understand. He never will. I must let it go before I say a regrettable truth. We’re having a good time here—I don’t want to ruin it. “Okay. I will keep her stocked with beef, wine, turrón and maté, like a good Argentinean kid.”

“Thanks. I’ll get back to you ASAP so you can plan your year. I know you’ll want to climb, too. But for now, get us off this peak, will you?”

We brush the cracker crumbs off ourselves into the snow and turn down the hill again.

I'm colder now, the tiredness creeping in. It's just past noon, but our push for the summit began at three this morning. Sleep beckons mockingly, still so far away—not until basecamp, if Nick gets his way. Which he will.

This part of the snowfield is steep, icy in patches, tough on the legs. I wonder how Nick's knees are coping. In Kathmandu, he confessed he's having trouble in that area these days, and after that, I began to notice that he winces whenever he stands up.

One more hour and the effects of gravity, of bracing my legs against the downward slope, have started a good, strong burn in my thigh muscles. I hate the descent, and this is just one of the reasons.

It's heavy at sea level. When I was ten, our Geography teacher told us that columns of air stretch up from the ground, from the trees, from the buildings, from everyone's head and shoulders, all the way up to the edge of space, and that the air in those columns is compressed by the weight of the atmosphere above it. Mr. Calder also said that air columns are the most dense at the surface of the earth, and the density decreases with altitude. For two days after that Geography lesson, I walked around feeling crushed and breathless, and still now, whenever I think about it, the claustrophobia squeezes me. Down on flat ground, the weight sits on my back. Up in the mountains, always, I'm lighter. The lightest I ever felt was at the top of Everest, and I never wanted to come down.

But you've always got to go down.

A couple of times, I sink thigh-deep into the snow and each time, my little inner voice says *this is it, the crevasse you've been fearing*, but each time it's just a depression and I wade out of it before Nick can reach me.

So when I'm snatched off my feet, for the first split second again I think it's nothing, until I hit the ground ass first. The shock jars my spine, smacks my teeth together, rattles my eyes in my head.

And then I see my father arc across the snow, past me, around and in front of me, and then everything speeds up again and the landscape blurs and I'm skidding down the mountain after Nick, Nick who must have slipped and fallen, Nick I'm tied to by rope.

My training finally kicks in, enough to make me flip onto my belly and throw all my weight onto my ice axe, blade end deep in the snow and blunt adze end shoved hard and painful into my armpit. Feet up so my crampons can't catch the snow and spin me. I jerk to a halt and snap my head around, exactly in time to watch the end of Nick's slide, slow and graceful, disappearing over the lip of a cliff. Below it, twenty-three thousand feet of open air.

Nick's free-hanging weight slams against my harness. Our umbilical cord is nothing but a hundred feet of rope. It takes the force. My ice axe doesn't. At the mercy of his bulk, it pops.

"Motherfuck!" Again I'm sliding, scrabbling desperately with my free hand, the snow disintegrating through my fingers. Again some survival-keen part of my brain lights up enough to make me smash the axe into the snow with both hands, and I manage to stop, both feet now dug in. I push all my weight into the snow; I will myself to weigh a thousand pounds. The rope's beneath me, twisted around one thigh. During the slide, snow packed up under my jacket and the cold is starting to seep through my thermal undershirt to my belly.

And with snow all over my face, I can't see, but I'm too afraid to lift a hand and brush it away in case I let Nick go. Somewhere up the hill, I lost my goggles.

"Nick!" I yell. "Dad!"

The words bounce off the mountains back at me. Stupid, stupid—I'm going to trigger an avalanche. But I wait and eventually the echo dies without any answer. No sound now except my own harsh breathing.

I can't think. What do I do next? Set up a pulley to haul Nick up? Ordinarily I'd just keep lying here, anchoring Nick while he climbs the rope using his loops of cord for foot- and handholds. But Nick isn't answering and I don't know what that means. That he can't hear me? He's unconscious? I will not use the "D" word. I will not.

I hold my breath and put my face in the snow and strain to listen.

The rope judders beneath me, and I lift my head.

"Nick—are you climbing?"

There's no answer. He's not dead. Maybe he just can't hear me. But it could be a seizure, or a heart attack.

What the hell is he doing, though, to make the rope bounce that way? It creaks, shivers.

Suddenly it heaves far to the left, clenching agonizingly around my thigh.

"What are you doing?" I bellow, pain and fear coming out as anger.

The rope goes still again, taut around my leg. I wait. The urge to turn and look is almost unbearable. I have no idea how close I am to the edge now, and if Nick is climbing the rope, I need to stay still or risk sending both of us over the lip.

But there's no movement. My leg and foot are going numb and so is my belly, and I don't want to lose my balls or my leg to frostbite, and if Nick is bleeding or seizing, I need to get to him quickly. At least the snow's melted off my face enough that I can see. Nothing's changed: the day is beautiful and still. I think it's Monday.

I yell again: "Nick!"

Nothing.

Hanging on to the axe, I turn my head slow and careful to look. I'm thirty feet from the drop-off. The rope, a strained, pink line, cuts into the snow between us and over the too-close edge.

My head is jittery, scattered, but I force it to focus on what I need to do. Set up an anchor for Nick so I'm not the anchor anymore. Lower myself down to him. Assess. Rescue.

"Nick," I say. It comes out small, my throat tight with panic.

I'm a professional mountain guide. I have the certificate to prove it. I've been trained to rescue people. It's just no one ever told me I might have to rescue my own father.

I can't stay here forever. One of us is going to die, possibly both of us.

"Nick," I yell, furious at all of this, at us.

I whisper the steps for setting up an anchor, getting the process straight. Then I make myself move, start the slow loosening of the fingers of one hand from the ice axe. Half an inch at a time, ready to two-hand-grab the axe again if Nick's weight starts to pull me down, I reach back and pull a three-foot aluminum picket from the side of my pack like an arrow out of a quiver, and with everything I've got, drive it into the snow.

The long cord is hanging off my harness, somewhere beneath me, hard to reach. My fingers are shaking so much it's three tries before I can tie one end of the cord to the taut rope and the other end to the picket, but finally I think I have it. The nerve-racking part will be transferring Nick's weight to the picket, hoping it holds. Then I'll have to attach myself to the picket too and fish the extra rope out of my pack. All this so eventually I can unclip from this rope: take myself out of the equation, freed up to actually do something.

Nick's life relies on me, a piece of aluminum, and some strands of nylon. If I tie one knot wrong, I will lose him. The terror of it is paralyzing: long, expensive seconds' worth of paralysis. I lie there with my face in the snow again, knowing I have to move but unable to do anything except listen to the rope with my fingers, waiting for a vibration. The rope stays quiet.

*Just do it.*

Before I think I'm completely ready, the only way to trick myself into it, I reach down to my waist again and unclip myself from the rope. My air traffic controller belay device, my beloved ATC, clinks loose against the harness buckle, and it feels dizzyingly strange and wrong that it isn't connected to the rope in some way. Holding my breath, I begin to roll away slowly, praying the picket will take Nick's weight, ready if it doesn't. But everything resists and it's only when I grope beneath myself that I remember the rope is still wrapped tight around my leg. I'm trapped. When I try to slip my leg under and over the rope to free it, it won't move. Wound too tight.

It's not fair. This trip wasn't supposed to go like this—what did we do to deserve this, yet more piled onto everything we've already been through this year. And now my eyes are stinging with hot and useless tears, freezing and dangerous. I can't see anything. I swipe at my eyes with my sleeve, but that's pointless—it's waterproof—so I yank off my Snoopy hat to use as a Kleenex, then try to put it back on with one hand and I can't so I hurl it into the snow.

I need to calm down.

I take a deep breath, then another, trying to get in some oxygen. I reach down yet again. As soon as I begin to tug the rope off my leg, I feel it: it springs to life thanks to the weight at the other end. It comes free much faster than I expected.

There isn't one ounce of forgiveness in this system. Every mistake must be paid for.

And it all goes to hell. The extra slack in the rope is too sudden, too much for the anchor. Nick's weight grabs and pulls and I should have attached myself to the rope again before I tried this but I didn't, I forgot, so the rope goes taut too fast and the picket isn't angled enough and I hear it give and give in with a deep groan. I throw myself back onto the rope, but there's no way I can beat the force of gravity, no way that I, at six-two, two hundred pounds, am heavy enough to stop Nick's fall.

The picket flies out of the snow. It wallops me in the shoulder and jaw and there's no fighting the instinct that makes me jerk away. And then the rope and the picket are free and gone. It sounds like the fastest zipper in the world.

The whole lot of it disappears over the edge.

“Nick! *Dad!*”

I start to scramble up, don't get far. Pain screams into my shoulder—fractured? dislocated? Everything blanks out for a second. Grey mist. I sway, stab my ice axe into the snow with my good hand to hold me upright. When the pain recedes to a deep throb and I come back into myself, it's clear I can't down-climb to look for him. I have to radio for help, a rescue: I'll need to be helicoptered off while the search for Nick starts from below, from basecamp. There's no way to give myself a chance to atone for my mistake alone before I have to confess it to the world.

I creep to the lip of the cliff, trying not to jar my shoulder. Below, the world of rock yawns open. No sign of my father except for a long, bloody line on the snow covering a ski-ramp-like piece of rock five hundred feet down, where he must have bounced and slid before he continued his fall.

My knees are good knees, trained to hold heavy weights. Better than Nick's knees. But just then, they give way.

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It's the kind of call you never want to have to make. But I do it, because who else can. On an upturned bucket in the dark, I hunch over the phone, my back toward the glow-lit tents of the other climbers at basecamp. She takes a long time to answer. I picture her trying to get to the phone, weak and slow since the radiation. Just as I'm about to despair, hang up and try again later—because how could I leave a voicemail about this?—she picks up, voice filled with gladness because she's recognized it as a long, complicated satellite number. Not the number of the phone in Nick's pack, specifically; that battery will have long since died. But a call from the mountain. A call from Nick.

"Mamá," I say. Only Spanish will do for this. Not English. Not French—French is Nick and my language, and my mother sometimes gets left behind with it. "It's me."

She knows immediately, her voice sharpening: "What's happened?"

I close my eyes and just say it. "He fell. Mamá, we're still looking but—"

She cries out. And I hear in it the thirty-four years of her fear, her waiting for this, the endless grind of it, any relief when he came back down safely those last times forgotten in an instant because none of what came before matters anymore. Only this time matters, this one time when he has not come back down. All her prayers, those Saint Christophers she makes us wear, the blessing worn off at last. All her safety nets have failed. Thanks to me.

"*When?*"

"...On the descent."

"*Yesterday? You waited until now to tell me?*"



“I know, I—”

“This is why he is not answering the phone! Remigio, I just thought the battery—!... Why didn't you tell me?”

“Listen, listen! We're hunting for him.”

Somewhere on the peak there is a tiny, glimmering line of headlamps: the rescue party, comprising climbers who were already on Manaslu, others who have flown in from nearby peaks to help look, because it's Nick. Snaking upward in the direction I thought he fell, ranging over the ice and debris and down into the valleys. With this shoulder, I'm useless, I can't carry a pack, but today I went up three times on the big Russian MI 17 helicopter. In fifteen minutes, we climbed the distance it takes a week to walk. And despite it all, I could only admire the mountain all over again, the view of her standing peaceful against the blue sky. I wanted to hate her, but I couldn't.

And at first I kept hope, because it seemed impossible that Nick could be gone. Nick is charmed, Teflon coated, somehow miraculously escaping from a myriad of epic adventures from the Andes to the Alps to the Himalayas. Nick's books on mountaineering and exploration take up half a bookshelf in the “Adventure” section at Barnes & Noble and Chapters. He used to have his own series on the Discovery Channel. If you need a quote on mountains, Nick's the one you call. I've kept reminding myself about Joe Simpson, who fell and was cut loose by his climbing partner out of self-preservation, except Joe was still alive and managed to crawl down the mountain with a broken leg. Or Lincoln Hall, who sat out all night on Everest and survived. My friend Russell fell two thousand feet down Mount Kenya and walked away with nothing but a concussion and a dislocated shoulder. And that's why I put off and put off this phone call.

From the juddering helicopter I strained my eyes, searching the world below, but there was no Nick. No burgundy flash of his jacket. All the mountain's flutes and folds and pockets: a million places to hide someone. Nick could have landed anywhere. Rolled anywhere. Or not made land at all. He could be stuck up there, thousands of feet up, wedged between rocks. And I couldn't find the streak of blood I saw yesterday, the snow having blown over it perhaps, and eventually the pilot said we needed to turn back because the cloud had begun to roll in. It's as if Manaslu is laughing at Nick and me for thinking we'd conquered her, and now I *could* hate her a little.

To make things worse, images have started to ooze up from somewhere deep inside me: Nick broken over a rock, or hanging by the throat, or cut nearly in half by a knife-edge crest. Every time they make my gut clench, and every time it's becoming harder to push the pictures away.

I hurry on, "I was hoping for good news before I called you. But I don't, I can't—Ma, there's a storm coming tomorrow..." I don't have to finish the sentence with her.

*"You will not stop looking!"*

"Of course not—we're doing everything we can until we—"

"My God, my God." Another of those wails that cuts all the way through. "Why am I not there. I knew this would happen, him without me, I had a bad feeling and I pushed it away regardless, thinking of the *money!* What is the meaning of *money* now!"

"It's my fault." I need to confess. I need her to hear. "He fell, he was over the edge and I think maybe unconscious, I screwed up with the rope and picket rescue, and he just—.... I'm sorry, Mamá, I'm so sorry—I fucked up."

I'm glad that unlike the other climbers I've babbled this to, she doesn't try to say *don't worry, it wasn't your fault, you did everything you could, things happen so fast in these situations*, because that is a lie. She and I both know the truth of it: I failed.

**Nick**

**Manaslu, Tuesday September 5, 2006: 09:02 a.m.**

Chopper. For sure, beating closer across the morning. If I could only flash something metallic, get their attention. What on me is reflective—metal scan: goggles, jacket reflectors, ski pole, watch. All that, and I cannot fucking move any of it. Not a foot or a hand or my lips to scream.

It roars into my strip of sky, bit by bit (I can tell by the colour and the heft that they've brought out the big guns, the Russian hardware). I lie beneath it, paralyzed, mummified, staring. See me. See me. *SEE ME*. But it's passing: throat, feet, belly, tail, gone.

I black out, I guess.

When I come to, it's to the sounds of the rescue team again: the snatch of the chopper blade, a shout on the wind, like a radio dial flipping from station to station. So near so far. I need out of this slit in the earth. I've got shit to do.

So just reach up, head toward the sky and out. You've climbed harder stuff than this, Lavoie. But every time I strain to move a hand, heave at it with my brain, nothing works; out of my control.

Can't move anything. Can't feel anything. Can't open my mouth to scream for help—something is very wrong with my jaw and tongue. Bad signs. At least numbness equals no pain, because there probably should be pain. Whenever I try to move, blood fills my mouth. I can't tell

where it's coming from, but it's welling up from somewhere deep, I reckon. Pieces of myself detaching, one by one.

Ice is melting beneath me, echoing drips that sound like they've fallen a long way. That will be my body heat thawing it out—hilarious, when my face is so goddamn cold. At some point, whatever it is that caught me midway will melt through and I'll fall a long way, too. Directly above is a rectangle of sky, laughably blue and clear. Not even a storm to make Remy feel better. He'll never be able to say *We lost him in a storm. The weather turned bad. There was no visibility*. No, just a beautiful clear day and one dumb misstep. My life in a nutshell—Isobel would agree.

Oh yeah, the only other sound, a few times? The satellite phone ringing in my pack. Did you know you can't answer a phone with just the powers of the mind? I haven't heard it for a while, though; maybe the battery ran out, or maybe she's just given up calling.

The last time I felt this alone on a big peak was probably that night on Aconcagua.

...Oh, no no no. No. The one thing I can still control is the places my mind drifts to, and we're *not* going there, fuck you very much. Stay positive. That's the key. That's what I would tell someone else.

Twenty-four hours ago, when I was on terra firma, I knew some things as surely as I know what needing a piss feels like. I knew that after watching what Isobel's been through, if I got hit with the cancer stick, I'd never let them poison me with chemo; I'd let myself die instead. I knew climbing was the one thing in our lives that made sense. I knew that sex was as important as climbing and eating and sleeping.

Now, even though I fear that at best I'll be in a wheelchair and at worst strapped to a board like that guy in that movie, the one who could communicate only by blinking, and I'll

likely never feel my dick again, it doesn't matter. I just want out of here. I want out. I want to see Isobel and Remy again. I choose life, in whatever form I can get it.

No one is going to see me unless they fall in here with me.

Please. Help me. Please.